Double Issue

COMEDY

Hollywood Laugh Track by Sam Merrill

JANUARY 9 1978 $1.25
THE FEATURE NEWS MAGAZINE

NewTimes

Craig Russell • David Steinberg • Larry Flynt • Marshall Brickman
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Lily Tomlin • Mark O'Donnell • Jimmy Carter • Groucho • And More!

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by Paul Slansky

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OPTONICA THE OPTIMUM.

JANUARY 9, 1978
VOLUME 10, NUMBER 1

New Times

BOBBY LONDON

I Didn't Know the Gun Was Loaded

JFK mistakenly ki[illegible]d by the Polish CIA? [illegible]ary Gilmore still [illegible]ive? E. Howa[illegible] Hunt at Ford's Theat[illegible]? Amazing, and ma[illegible]e even true. More [illegible]clusive theories from [illegible] assassination b[illegible]ad.
By Rob[illegible]manson
Pa[illegible] 24

NANCY WEI[illegible]CK

Big C's Gonna Get You

Magazi[illegible]nt, it turns out, is [illegible]nogenic too. Sorry about that. Another in the *New Times* dread disease series. Very long.
By Arthur Lubow
Page 38

DENNIS BRACK[illegible]ACK STAR

JERRY WACHTER

Reverse Cl[illegible]es

Have you e[illegible]noticed how complete[illegible]ifferent Mick Jagge[illegible]d Walter Cro[illegible]e look? Frankly, ne[illegible]r had we until [illegible]year-old Bobby Wood [illegible]alked into our office with his collection of 10,000 twosomes who look not a whit alike. Small world, isn't it?
By Rob Wood
Page 67

JAMES JOERN

Adidas Madness: The 26-Mile High

Widely hailed as the fresh-air cure for bad sex and boredom, running will either add ten years to your life or subtract fifteen. The author of "The Ecstasy of Long-Distance Pain" here proposes a marathon-or-croak regimen for the elderly.
By George A. Hirsch
Page 30

ANIMALS ANIMALS INC.

Raccoon Worshi[illegible] in Wyoming

Thousands of devotees are quitting their jobs and flocking west to worship at the paws of America's hottest new guru, a ring-tailed Rama whose nightly garbage-runs through downtown Cheyenne belie his lavish lifestyle. "This," says coonstruck Charles Colson, "is the real thing."
By Ruth Rosenbaum
Page 60

Letters
Still more enraged Elvis fans.
Page 4

Party Lines
McGovern–Shriver: 1980 dream ticket.
By Robert Shrum
Page 6

Environment
A new invention tur[illegible] sludge into garba[illegible]and back again.
By Stephen Sin[illegible]lar
Page 8

Dollar Signs
The Shah of Iran buys Arkansas and Mississippi.
By A. Gallatin
Page 11

Media
Rupert Murdoch bails out Berkowitz.
By Debra Weiner
Page 14

Food
Wonder Bread: A[illegible]aluable source of oxyg[illegible]
By Robert W[illegible]
Page 17

The In[illegible]er
Jer[illegible]own's 43–day f[illegible]Punk ecology/Richard [illegible]xon goes to a disco/ESP cures baldness.
Page 18

REVIEWS

Movies
Flubber, Bloody Flubber: Peckinpah's savage ode to Disney.
By Richard Corliss
Page 70

Books
Routes: A powerful saga of the interstate highway system.
By Geoff[illegible]
P[illegible]

Music
Tony Orlando: Bac[illegible]d Better Than Eve[illegible]
By Patrick C[illegible]
Page 75

Reco[illegible]
Sh[illegible]ed Specs and [illegible]in Scabs: A new [illegible]rection for John Denver.
By Jim Miller
Page 76

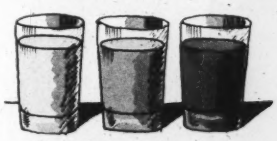
Final Tribute
Martin Van Buren died 116 years ago, but it seems like only 58.
By Mark Goodman
Page 80

RUM REVELATIONS.

Surprising facts every rum drinker should know.

Ah, what rum drinkers don't know about rum. So Myers's thinks it's time to raise some eyebrows.

The first fact of rum. Rum comes in three shades: white, gold, and dark. Some light rums are blended to have a barely noticeable taste. Their flavor might fade in the drink. But Myers's is blended specially to be more flavorful. The Myers's comes through the mixer.



Another surprise. Dark rum isn't any stronger than light rum. Both are the same alcoholic proof. So Myers's isn't any stronger, even though it has a tastier rum flavor.

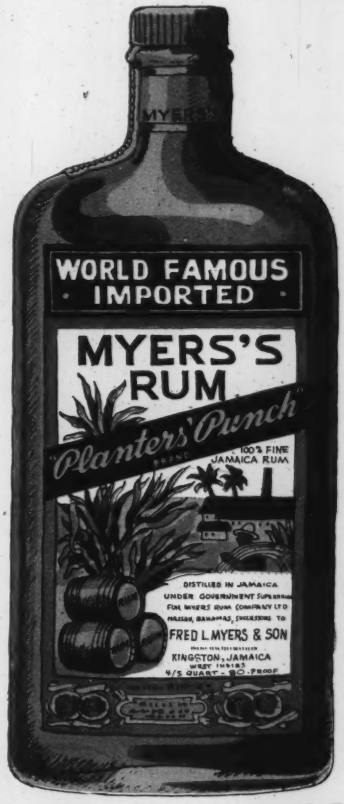
More revelations. Myers's is more expensive. It's imported from Jamaica where it's

made slowly, in small batches. The richer taste is worth the time. And the price.

Still another little known fact. Caribbean bartenders mix Myers's into exotic drinks made with lighter rums. They trust Myers's to enhance the flavor. So discover for yourself the dash that Myers's adds to a simple Rum & Cola. The

extra punch Myers's adds to a Planters' Punch. Here are the recipes for your pleasure.

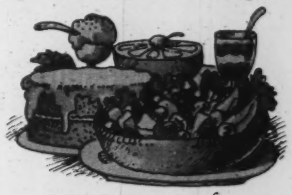
Myers's Planters' Punch: Combine in shaker, 3 oz. orange juice, juice of ½ lemon or lime, 1½ oz. Myers's. Add 1 tsp. superfine sugar and dash of grenadine. Shake well and serve in tall glass filled



with ice. Add orange slice, cherry.

Myers's Rum and Cola: Into a highball glass, add 1½ oz. Myers's Rum. Fill glass with cola beverage. Add slice of lemon or lime, and stir.

And finally, one last point. Dark rum is better to use in cooking than light rum. Myers's adds a fuller rum flavor to foods. Try sprinkling Myers's over grapefruit halves. It's a simple way



to create an interesting first course. Myers's makes so many rum recipes even more delicious.

So now that you know the facts, your choice should be clear: Myers's Rum.

Because if you like rum, it's time you discovered the pleasures that wait for you in the dark.

Next to Myers's All other Rums Seem Pale.

Imported by Seagram Distillers Co., 375 Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022, 80 Proof.

JANUARY 9, 1978
VOLUME 10, NUMBER 1

New Times

The Hollywood Laugh Track

The gag writers who grew up hating *Father Knows Best* are churning out more of the same at Hollywood's sit-com factories, where failure is often the easiest road to success.
By Sam Merrill
Page 27

The Hillcrest Gang

Hanging out with the fastest, oldest wits in the West.
By David Steinberg
Page 38

Comedy's Valley Forge

A gig at New York's Improv can lead to a Hollywood mansion—or a Ninth Avenue freeze-out.
By Patrick Carr
Page 40

Comedy Roots

The funniest aluminum-siding salesman in America, and the mayor of Second City.
By John Morthland
Page 42

Zora Says, "Cheese"

A high-school cootie strikes back.
By Trucia Kushner
Page 45

Comedy Is the New Rock

While rock was pulling punches, comedy started to hurt.
By Tracy Young
Page 46

Martin Mull Is Almost Famous

The Johnny Carson of Fernwood lets banality kitsch and tell.
By Paul Slansky
Page 53

How Things Don't Work

A reference book for the man who knows nothing.
By Marshall Brickman
Page 60

Talk About Dubious Achievements!

In the world of Guinness records, fame lasts as long as a 1.5-mile kielbasa.
By Jonathan Black
Page 62

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Manic

We rifle the notebooks of a sweetly twisted mind.
By Mark O'Donnell
Page 70

The King-Queen of Drag

Craig Russell, the star of *Outrageous!*, dresses up our dreams.
By Andrew Kopkind
Page 75

Great Moments in Religion

Born-again porn king Larry Flynt is now hustling for the Lord.
Page 81

Science
UFOs are no laughing matter—or are they?
By Tim Ferris
Page 8

Party Lines
Live, from Washington—off-the-record Gridiron Speeches.
By Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale
Page 13

The Insider
New Times' first annual Boring Scoop Awards.
Page 16

REVIEWS
Movies
Now playing at your local theater: TV sit-coms.
By Richard Corliss
Page 94

Books
Whatever happened to the classes of '39–'44?
By Geoffrey Wolff
Page 96

Final Tribute
Dogpatch closes down.
By Mark Goodman
Page 100

COVER
PHOTOGRAPH BY DOROTHY TANOUS

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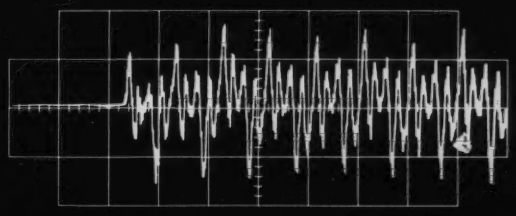
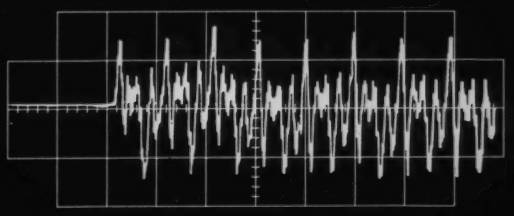
Will the real B.B. King please stand up.



B.B. King Live.



B.B. King reproduced by SB-7000A.

What the legendary B.B. King's rapid guitar picking style did for players like Eric Clapton, Mike Bloomfield and Alvin Lee is music history. He fathered a generation of blues-influenced rock guitarists.

But what B.B. King is doing with Technics Linear Phase Speaker Systems is making another kind of history. Hi-fi history.

Look at the waveforms. On the left is B.B. King playing live. On the right is the same music reproduced by Technics Linear Phase SB-7000A.

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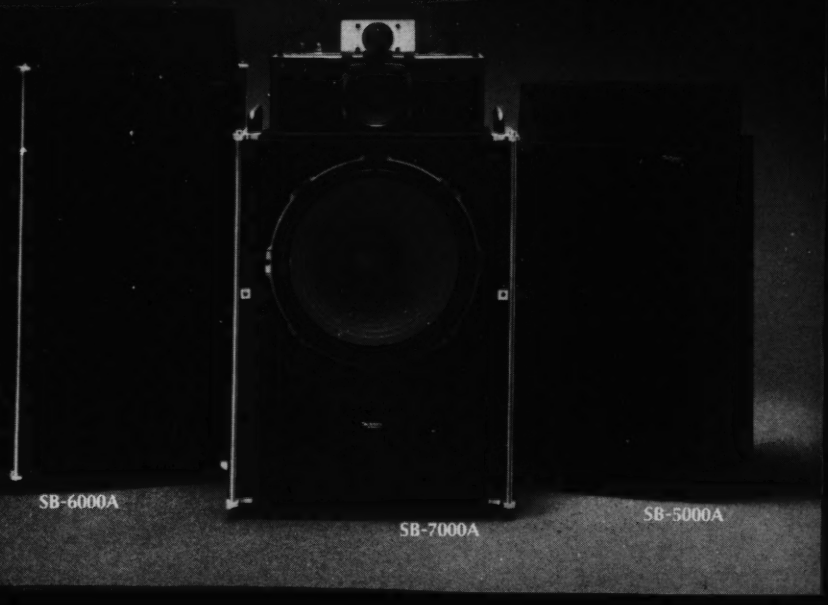

"DOWN TWO THEN LEFT."
NEW BOZ SCAGGS.
ON COLUMBIA RECORDS AND TAPES.

Produced by Joe Wissert.

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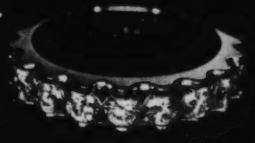
A lifetime ago, yesterday...
We married. Made a promise,
as our parents and their parents had done.
White gown. Confetti. Cake. A wedding ring.
Today, another lifetime began. And with
this brand new love come fresh experiences for us.
Warm bottles. Blankets. Softness. An eternity ring.
Happy birthday to the three of us.

A diamond eternity ring.



The eternity ring. A full or half circle of diamonds...for an anniversary or the birth of a child. Ask your jeweler for the booklet. De Beers Consolidated Mines, Ltd.

Science/by Tim Ferris

We Are All Alone

My favorite UFO story involved an elderly lady living alone in the Southwest. A spacecraft landed in her backyard one evening and its crew of extraterrestrials disembarked. They resembled humans but were smaller, had pointed ears and, as I recall, they glowed with a silver hue. Communicating by means of telepathy, they inquired if they might use the kitchen. The lady obliged. The space creatures, hungry after their long journey, made themselves some pancakes, ate, thanked their hostess and departed in their saucer-shaped ship. The lady telephoned the local newspaper, which dispatched a reporter who, after hearing the story, asked the lady if she could offer any concrete evidence in support of it. "Yes, of course," she replied, and led the reporter to the kitchen. She held out a plate. On the plate lay a pancake.

Today the flying pancakes and their compatriots (mostly friendly, though a swarthy spaceman spotted recently is said to thirst for Rh negative human blood) are back in the news, thanks in part to the release of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*—whose extraterrestrials, it gives me nostalgic pleasure to note, resemble humans but are smaller, have pointed ears and glow silver. The film is fiction, of course, but it takes UFO sightings seriously—they are portrayed hyperbolically on screen, like the larger-than-life shark in *Jaws*—and its director, Steven Spielberg, volunteers that he considers UFOs no laughing matter. "The UFO phenomenon," he says, "is the most seductive and significant adventure into the unknown of our lifetime." Spielberg is 29, so he is talking about a lifetime that has witnessed decoding of the DNA molecule, photography of quasars at the edge of the universe, the development of high energy particle physics, the landing of instrumented spacecraft on Mars and Venus, and human excursions to the bottom of the ocean and the surface of the moon. These pale by comparison to UFOs, says Spielberg.

His enthusiasm has been echoed on Madison Avenue, Sunset Strip and even in the White House. A *Newsweek* cover story headlined "THE UFO'S ARE COMING!" bestowed upon J. Allen Hynek—whose career in astronomy was inconspicuous by comparison with his latter-day career as a flying-saucer enthusiast—the accolade "Galileo of UFOlogy." *New West*, in a cover story of its own, informed its readers that "there's overwhelming evidence that UFOs are real. . . . Something real is going on out there, the exact nature of which defies us, eludes and mesmerizes us, but has to convince us that we alone are not the masters of the universe."

No convincing evidence has been found to suggest Earth has been visited recently, or in the remote past. None

At about the time the film was released, President Carter, who as governor of Georgia once reported sighting a UFO, asked the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to study the UFO question. The request threw NASA into a state of alarmed paralysis—a not unprecedented posture for that agency—because NASA stands to endure scorn from reputable scientists if it complies, wrath from the White House if it does not. When I asked a NASA spokesman about the matter, he sounded pained. "We'll handle the reports," he said, "but we won't catalog or investigate them. If somebody writes in to say they've seen a UFO, we'll say, 'Yeah, well, thanks a lot for telling us.'"

If that spells compliance with Carter's request, I wondered what did NASA *used* to do with UFO reports? Set them afire and dance round them in a ring?

UFOs have been investigated at length by the government and by a variety of independent groups; a large body of literature on the subject has accumulated over the years and it is possible by now to reach an objective conclusion. Here it is:

No convincing evidence has been found to suggest that Earth has been visited, recently or in the remote past, by spacecraft from elsewhere. None. Really. There's nothing to it.

UFOs may be of interest to students of theology (religious motives inform a substantial minority of those who report seeing them) or folklore (some UFO reports read just like medieval accounts of angels and elves) or the nature of perception (many UFOs are optical illusions) or other earthly matters. But *nothing* in the 30 years of sightings collected since the contemporary UFO flap began compels the conclusion that UFOs have anything to do with space travel. The situation might change tomorrow—here we sit on a small planet, available to any visitor who has the desire and means to get here—but as for today, we humans remain the sole spacefarers resident on Earth.

This is not to say we are alone in the universe, any more than I should conclude that giant squid don't exist because none has knocked on my front door. The universe is a big place. Our sun is one of 100 billion or more stars in the Milky Way galaxy, which in turn is one of 100 billion or so galaxies in the observable universe. The conviction that there must be thinking beings on other worlds, itself a motive behind much of the UFO fad, finds encouragement in these giant numbers.

We know of at least one good way to seek evidence of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe. It is to use radio telescopes to listen for signals dispatched by beings on other planets. Scientists call this idea SETI (search for extraterrestrial intelligence), and it could begin almost immediately at modest cost.

But astonishingly, almost nothing is being done about it. The idea that radio telescopes routinely search for evidence of intelligent life represents a popular misconception. In fact, their time is spent almost entirely on radio astronomy—a worthy endeavor, and one that should continue to grow, but one that offers only marginal hope of answering the question of whether we have living companions in the cosmos.

A preliminary search for artificial radio signals from space could be launched *and sustained for five years* for no more money than it cost to make *Close Encounters*. A proposal to begin just such a search is now before NASA, but officials there seem hesitant about it, perhaps because they are uncertain what the public response would be. No comment has been forthcoming from President Carter.

We have a choice. We can embark on SETI, the potential rewards of which are as grand as anything in the history of human thought. Or we can stick to the movies.●

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For instance, our story on "America's Killer Water" was a clear-eyed look at a disaster-in-the-making that most people are afraid to face.

Our special issue on "The Future" was an audacious search for meanings and portents in everything from genetic engineering to sexual crossovers, from lasers and the science of aging to coping with leisure.

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The magazine of the '80s

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Fascinating. But not astonishing.

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The Rabbit hops from 0 to 50 mph in 8.3 seconds.

Most Japanese cars don't.

If you're interested in superior handling and maneuverability, you'll get them in a Rabbit, because the Rabbit has front-wheel drive.

Most Japanese cars don't.

If you're interested in economy, a VW Rabbit with a diesel engine got the highest mileage of any car in America for 1978: 53mpg on the highway, 40mpg in the city.

The gasoline Rabbit is no slouch, either, with 38mpg on the highway, 25mpg in the city. (EPA estimates, with standard transmission. Your own mileage may vary, depending on how and where you drive, your car's condition and optional equipment.)

In short, the Rabbit delivers precisely what thoughtful people anywhere want in a car: performance, room, handling, economy.

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Party Lines/by Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale

The Fritz and Grits Show

Just over 50 Washington reporters belong to the Gridiron Club, a 92-year-old news writers' fraternity whose raison d'être is a prestigious annual white-tie dinner and political roast. The thousand or so guests include the nation's highest officials, media barons and major business executives. Following the club's skits (during which prominent journalists dress in drag), the politicians are given an opportunity to respond.

At last spring's dinner, Vice President Mondale spoke for the Democrats, Senate Minority Leader Howard Baker for the Republicans. And, like many of his presidential predecessors, Jimmy Carter attended his own Gridiron roasting and replied in kind, concluding—as is traditional—with a few serious words.

Gridiron evenings are strictly off the record for those in attendance, but New Times *(which wasn't there) is pleased to share with its readers this year's remarks by the President and the Vice President of the United States.*

Vice President Mondale:

I am delighted to be here at the Gridiron dinner tonight, and especially to share the platform with my friend, Howard Baker . . . As you know, Howard wanted to run for Vice President, but his timing was bad—I believe he was too anxious. I handled it differently. I let my competitors go ahead of me to Plains, and it worked this way.

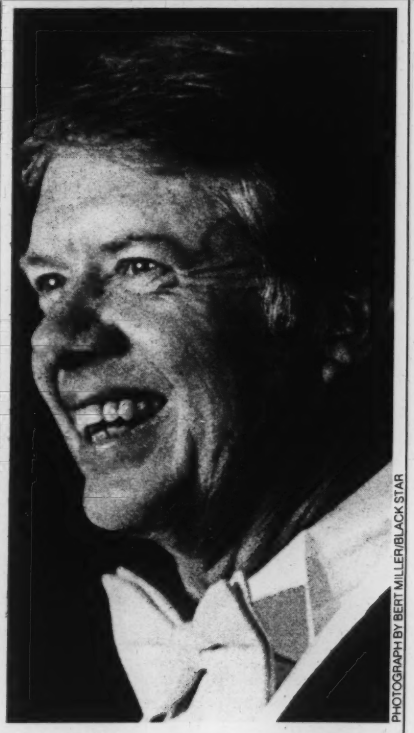
Ed Muskie went down to Plains and told Jimmy, "I'm dying to see the peanut trees."

John Glenn got off the plane and whispered in Rosalynn's ear, "You know, my favorite food is blue-eyed peas."

Frank Church called Governor Carter and said that while he'd never been to Georgia himself, one of his relatives was stationed in the army there for a while—General Sherman.

By the time I arrived, Jimmy met me at the plane and said, "If you just keep your mouth shut, the job's yours."

Now, Howard, we know that you have ambitions to be President someday. And there is no constitutional provision excluding a southerner. You're a young man and you'll still be young enough to run after my second term in the White House in 1992. Of course you'll have to run against Teddy Kennedy—if you can make it through the primaries against Ronald Reagan.



PHOTOGRAPH BY BERT MILLER/BLACK STAR

Tonight I'd like to clear up one misunderstanding. People think this administration doesn't like Republicans. The truth is that we really miss them. We don't have anybody to fight with now. Except Bob Byrd and Tip O'Neill. And Scoop Jackson. And maybe Jack Brooks. And Mo Udall. And Ed Muskie. And Russell Long—and all the mayors and governors of our country.

The President and I have been very busy trying to stay close to the American people. The President himself has gone to town meetings and taken questions from average citizens. I'm trying to do my part by attending simple white-tie dinners like this and talking to plain folks like you.

We're proud of the fact that we've done away once and for all with the imperial presidency. In fact, the only time that you'll hear "Hail to the Chief" played in this town anymore is when Ben Bradlee walks into the newsroom at the *Washington Post*.

Naturally, as Vice President, I've had to disclose my financial holdings. In so doing, I saw that Joe Califano gave up $500,000 a year to be Secretary of HEW, Blumenthal $400,000 a year to go to Treasury, and Cy Vance a quarter of a million dollars a year to become Secretary of State. As far as I can tell, I'm the only one who took the job because he needed the money.

I'm very pleased to report that the traditional hostility between a President and Vice President is gone. There is an unprecedented close working relationship between the President and myself. Relations couldn't be better. I even have a hot line to the President. It goes from the White House, to the treehouse, to me.

And every morning I get the same briefings as the President from the CIA. He gets his from Admiral Turner; I get mine from Ted Sorensen.

We have had, in fact, only one dispute. The other day I went in and asked the President to appoint my son as a federal judge. The President said, "Fritz, I can't do that—he's only 19 years old."

"I know that," I said, "but by the time Ham Jordan gets through clearing him, he'll be old enough."

We have made several important changes in the procedures at the White House. In the previous administration, they used to have a daily foreign policy briefing. We've changed that—now we simply have a daily foreign policy.

There are still some parts of this job of being Vice President that I don't understand. For example, every week, a contractor comes in from Maryland and leaves a plain brown envelope on my desk. And what I can't understand is—no groceries.

I've noticed that there have been some criticisms about the administration's position on cuts in the defense budget. We've been accused of lack of clarity on this point. And since so many of you here tonight own newspapers or write editorials, I want to take this opportunity to set that issue straight. It's something I worked on myself, and I understand it completely. It's really simple to understand once you grasp the principle of zero-based budgeting.

The President promised, as you recall, that he'd cut the defense budget by 5 to 7 billion dollars. Of course he was referring to the authorized fiscal year 1977 budget, or the appropriation for fiscal year '77, or '78. Now that figure, taking into account a constant level of inflation and depreciation, was somewhere between 80 and 105 billion dollars—uh, 102 billion. Now the final appropriation for fiscal year 1977 will not be the same. The authorization for '78—that is the continuing hold-over authorization figure—for that figure, once the zero-based calculation is met, will exceed or be less than the comparable figure for 1977, unless the actual spending figure comes in at a level which can mesh with the economic indicators and the new appropriation.

Now that's all there is to it. And I don't know why you can't understand it.

There are other things that I would like to clear up tonight as well. The truth of it is that in this administration, the Vice Presidency is the most powerful office in the land. And frankly, although the press has missed it, the signs are everywhere.

For example, on Inauguration Day, I rode from the Capitol all the way down to the White House in a chauffeured limousine, while the President had to walk.

Whenever *I* take a trip, you'll notice, I have an aide who carries the luggage; Carter has to carry his own.

When I travel, I go to Paris and London and Rome. He goes to Pittsburgh and Springfield and Charleston, West Virginia.

I stayed with the Queen at Buckingham Palace, he stayed with a beer distributor in Clinton, Massachusetts . . .

I could go on a lot longer about the powers of my office, but I've just been handed a note that my limousine has to be back by eleven . . . Does that include the suit too?

President Carter:

It is with a great deal of pleasure that my wife and I come here again to the Gridiron Club. I enjoyed very much the Democratic skit. The songs were beautiful . . . And then there was that speech about the daily foreign policy.

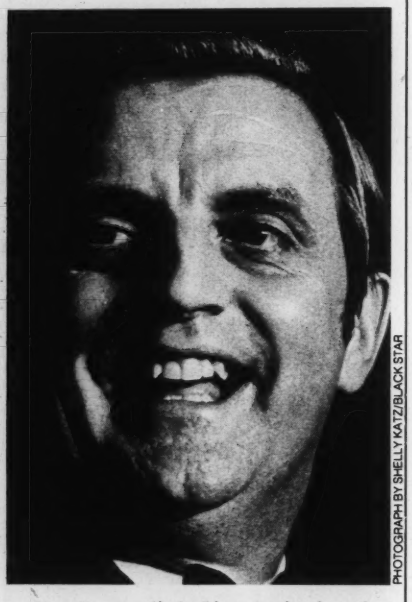
It's hard to know how to deal with problems like this that arise in the life of a President—for example, the acting Vice President . . .

Last year when I spoke to this distinguished group, I started my speech by smiling. For the life of me, I can't remember what I was smiling about.

At that time, when I came to Washington, nobody paid any attention to me. Even Jack Anderson wouldn't rake my muck. As a matter of fact, *Playboy* was the only one that would.

That interview really hurt me—and those of you in the audience didn't help much. One editor—I don't remember who it was—said that I would be the only President with a pornographic memory. Actually, I doubt I'm the only one.

I have gotten a great deal of advice from you, some of which, unfortunately, I've taken. I've read about my administration not being in close enough touch with the Congress and the governors, so I vetoed 19 damn water projects, rather, water dam projects . . . dam projects . . . I vetoed the damn projects!



PHOTOGRAPH BY SHELLY KATZ/BLACK STAR

I've been a little bit surprised at the reaction to that. You don't have the same perspective down home that you do up here. All over the country, communities are looking for 100, 200, 400, *1400* million-dollar projects. Why, I've spent a good deal of time just trying to get Plains a zip code.

I didn't appreciate the way you treated my brother Billy tonight. We used to have a very good relationship, Billy and I, until he began to get so much attention from the press. It's gone to his head. I noticed recently that someone asked him to describe my smile and he said that I looked like a fox licking sorghum syrup from a live light socket.

When that comes from your own brother, it kind of hurts.

I've had some trouble with the press, but I might say that I'm not the only one. Andy Young, for instance, was very critical of the press coverage of the agitators and the radicals. And for a while, I was very gratified to hear that Cy Vance was highly appreciative of what Andy had said—at least until Phil Habib told me that the reason that Cy was pleased was that he thought the real international agitators and radicals were the U.N. Ambassador and the President of the United States.

Some Republicans have said that our foreign policy is a disaster. I just thought that as the administrations changed, there ought to be some continuity.

As a matter of fact, I think that what we have done in the area of foreign affairs has not been adequately recognized. Andy, for example, has gotten very little appreciation for having the Cubans stabilize the situation in Angola.

I have put most of my time into the Middle East. I haven't quite completed my Mid-East policy analysis yet—right now I'm somewhere between the homeland and defensible borders . . .

As you probably noticed from the cartoons and so forth, there was an expression of doubt as to whether we could handle the White House, coming from Georgia and having a rural background. But Rosalynn has done a remarkable job in helping me welcome our visitors from foreign countries. We've had a number of them, as you know. And we've had good luck with all of them, except Prime Minister Rabin. When supper was over, he looked somewhat disconcerted. I've never quite understood why. I believe maybe it was because of a very tough question that Tip O'Neill asked him, just as we were finishing the pork chops.

With the Vice President I have, that office doesn't take much of the burden off my own shoulders. We've tried to use him to help fill up the small cracks—the speech to the Gridiron Club tonight, for instance . . .

I might add here that we have had some friends show their appreciation for what we've done. Hamilton Jordan is keeping the list . . .

In closing, I might say this . . . What you represent in the free society of our country is almost unique in all the world. You are men and women of independence and integrity. And I believe that our nation has been deeply blessed by the guarantee of this right among those who deal most closely with the American people—the news media and their leaders. Sometimes we can't please you with what we do. Sometimes we feel our own point of view, as expressed in the White House and the Congress, is distorted when it is presented to the people. But I think, more often than not, you're right . . .

And in the times when there has been a vicious, sharply drawn debate between the press and government leaders, almost invariably the press has been right. So I want to express my thanks to you for what you mean to our country. And I believe that together in the future, we can make it an even greater nation.●

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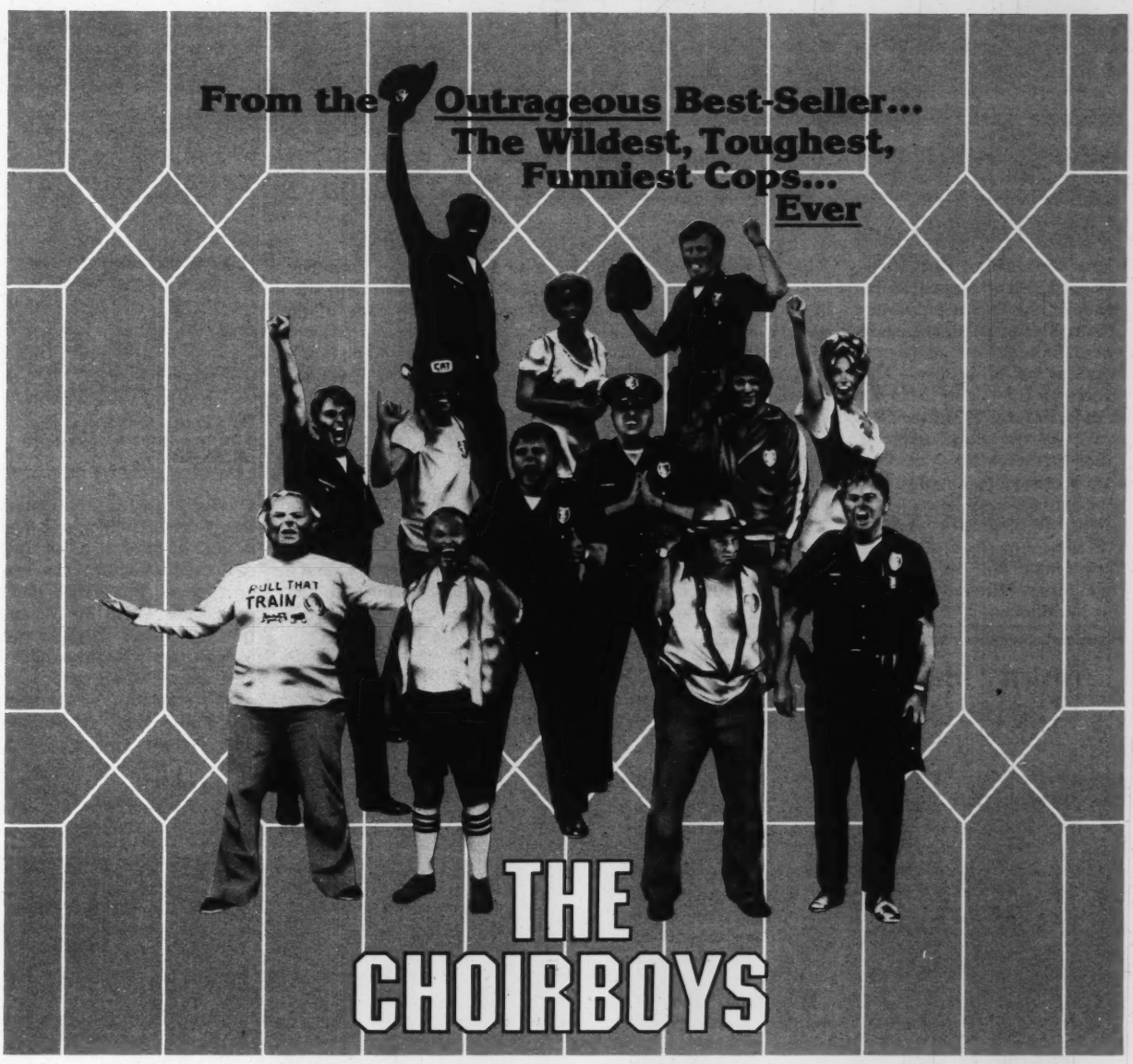

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Directed by ROBERT ALDRICH · Screenplay by CHRISTOPHER KNOPF

Based on the novel by JOSEPH WAMBAUGH · Produced by MERV ADELSON and LEE RICH

Executive Producers PIETRO and MARIO BREGNI and MARK DAMON · Music by FRANK DE VOL

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The Insider

Politics

How we age

Watergate Golden Boy Sheds Gloves, Shows Callousness

DENNIS BRACK/BLACK STAR

Ben-Veniste: Child of the 60s becomes a paradigm of the 70s

At the tender age of 32, Richard Ben-Veniste, then head of the Organized Crime Team at the Justice Department, won his first major conviction: he prosecuted Alan Dorfman for taking a $50,000 kickback on a Teamster Central States Pension Fund loan. Shortly thereafter, Ben-Veniste became a leading figure in our national soap opera: as assistant Watergate prosecutor, he won convictions against Bob Haldeman, John Erlichman, John Mitchell and Robert Mardian.

Years pass, and we now find Ben-Veniste doing something quite different: representing Alvin Malnik, a lawyer and Miami restauranteur alleged to be associated with Organized Crime, against the man who has identified him as such, Hank Messick. Messick, a Miami-based investigative reporter, has dealt with Malnik in three books—*The Mob in Show Business*, *The Private Lives of Public Enemies* and *Lansky*. Malnik particularly objects to the fact that Messick has linked him with Lansky, and has otherwise described him with such phrases as this: "one of the 2nd generation smoothies who are gradually assuming power as the men who began as bootleggers die off." Messick is not alone in his suspicions. The Nevada Gaming Control Board, which was curious about Malnik because of his role in Teamster Central States Pension Fund loan transactions and business dealings with Caesar's Palace, independently checked into his relationship with Lansky and concluded, in the words of Peter Echeverria, the board's chairman, "he's closer to Meyer Lansky than we had been led to believe."

Nevertheless, Ben-Veniste, on behalf of Malnik, has slapped a $12 million suit on Messick, who, in his 25 years of reporting, has never been involved in any litigation. Ben-Veniste's change of heart is not, of course, either unusual or unethical in the legal profession, but it has had a noticeable effect on the morale of those lawyers and prosecutors who are still serious about going after "the men at the top." Told about the Ben-Veniste turnaround, one former colleague said, "you're kidding." Another shrugged, "I'm not surprised. He's very ambitious."

—Lowell Bergman

Monty Hall in the White House: Carter Deals for Canal Treaty

DENNIS BRACK/BLACK STAR

Eastland: Cocks his Panama hat

A year ago, President Carter refused to trade water projects for votes on the $50 tax rebate and it caused him endless political trouble. Now he's learned to use Potomac poker to save his Panama Canal treaty—especially with senators from the South, where popular opposition to the treaty has been fierce.

Kentucky Senator Walter "Dee" Huddleston agreed to back the treaty in return for a White House pledge that the administration will ignore HEW Secretary Califano's recommendation to phase out federal subsidies for tobacco, one of Kentucky's mainstay crops.

Mississippi Senator (and Senate president pro tempore) James Eastland didn't give a whit about tobacco; he, however, will vote for the pact in return for the appointment of his friend, Urby Turner, to the board of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Turner sat on the Mississippi Television Board and the segregationist White Citizen's Council. When he was on the Mississippi board it helped forbid the state public TV outlets from showing *Sesame Street*—it was too liberal and the cast was integrated. "Urby Turner is G. Harrold Carswell," says one observer familiar with the deal. "But it's a cheap price to pay for Eastland's vote." •

HACKING THROUGH THE WASHINGTON BRUSH

Walt DeeCee's Federal Fairy Tales

• **Napoleonizing:** Jerry Brown, who has mounted a wall-size geopolitical map of the world behind the desk in his office. It's stuck with his dream of a worldwide network: pins of different colors speckle his grand vinyl design, signifying the State of California's relations with other foreign nations. "He's the only governor with a foreign policy," says one state official who's seen the pastel empire. Some say he's thinking of appointing an ambassador to Ohio. •

•**Evacuated:** *Decent Interval*, Frank Snepp's indictment of the CIA departure from South Vietnam—from Washington bookstores. In fact, at two stores, Kramer Books and Afterwards, the first shipment was purchased within an hour, in both cases by one man with a briefcase. Store employees were immediately suspicious that the CIA was up to its old tricks, and was attempting to buy out the book. If so, the agency will go broke or crazy in the attempt. As the manager of Brentanos in Georgetown says, "It's the hottest thing going." •

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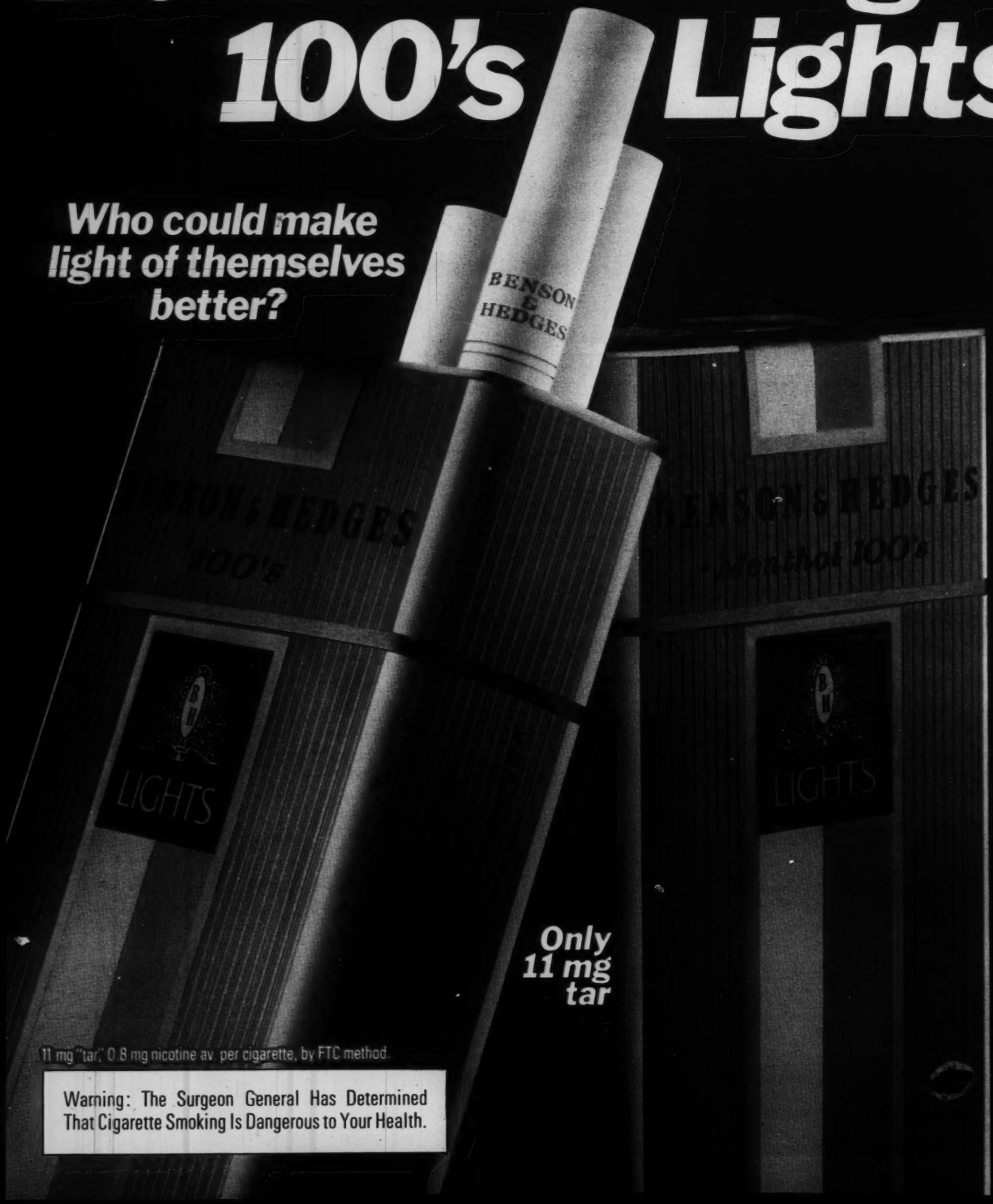

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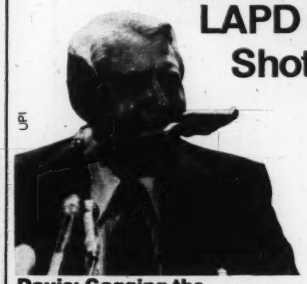
When the Naked and the Dead are One

At the Top of the Molehill: LAPD and the Shot Biochemist



UPI

Davis: Gagging the investigation?

Edward "hang them at the airport" Davis, Los Angeles' outspoken police chief, is readying his bid to take on Jerry Brown in next year's California gubernatorial race, but even before his drive gets under way, he is being severely undermined by two investigations probing possible improprieties in his powerful, 7,000-man department. One investigation is looking into the August 4 police shooting of an unarmed, naked biochemist on a deserted, central Los Angeles street and the second into the possibly unlawful shredding of nearly four tons of the Department of Internal Affairs files last year.

Davis claims a witness found by John Van de Kamp, the Los Angeles district attorney and an FBI director hopeful, will exonerate the L.A.P.D. in the shooting of the biochemist, Ron Burkholder. But Van de Kamp, anxious not to appear a push-over, scolds Davis for his public declarations about the witness, calling the chief's proclamations of L.A.P.D.'s innocence "premature."

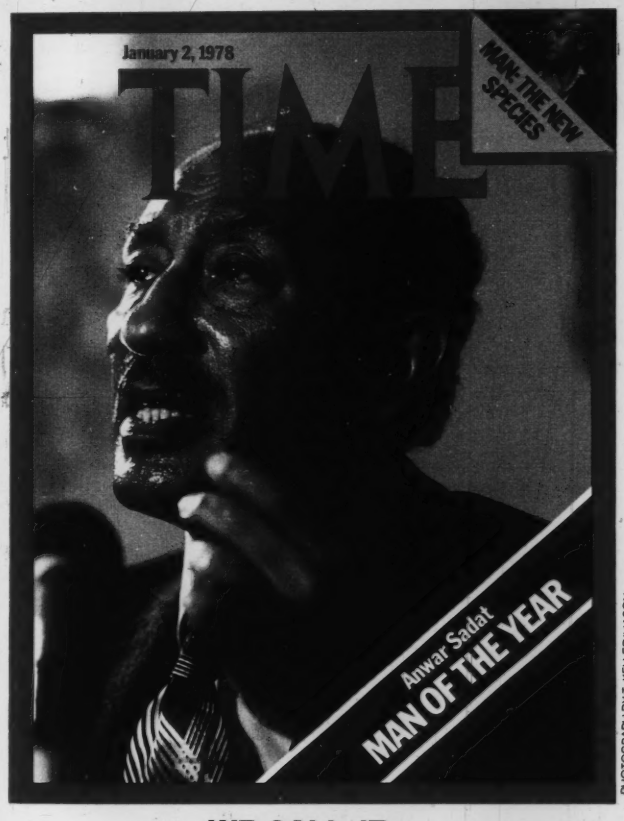
The shredding incident could prove even more embarrassing to the chief. Internal police memos reveal the files may have been destroyed because defense attorneys were seeking them out, leading to "moral problems" for L.A.P.D. officers.

Since June, the D.A.'s office has been investigating the affair, although there are many who doubt its full commitment to probing the roles of high-level officials. Davis, who claims he hasn't even been interviewed by the investigators, was angry when informed that the D.A. said Davis, himself, was a subject of the investigation. "You're trying to make a mountain out of a molehill," he said.

—Joel Kotkin

MY FAVORITE JOKE: BY THE INSIDER

Children, it's around this time of the year that the Insider likes to tell one of his favorite stories. A spaceship from another planet, due to a flat tire, is forced to land in the Lower East Side of New York City. Looking for a spare, the captain of the vessel (green and with ears like catalpa leaves, it's said) roamed the streets until he came upon a delicatessen, the window of which seemed to have a pan of spares. Entering the shop he pointed a feeler: "I need a couple of those wheels," he explained. Pityingly, the counterman smiled down. "They ain't wheels, kid," he explained. "They're bagels—eat one." The visitor took a bite, stood deep in thought and suddenly his green visage glowed. "You know what this wheel would be awfully good with?" he said. "Lox and cream cheese." •



PHOTOGRAPH BY T. KELLER/LIASON

WE CALL IT

Politics

THE INSIDERS: CLOAK AND DAGGER GO TO WASHINGTON

By Bobby London

LOOK! IT'S CARTER!
MR. PRESIDENT, IS IT TRUE THAT YOUR HONEYMOON WITH THE AMERICAN PEOPLE IS OVER?
CLICK
SOCK!!
GOD FOR-GIVE ME!
THEY SAY BAPTISTS DON'T BELIEVE IN DIVORCE!
BOBBY LONDON

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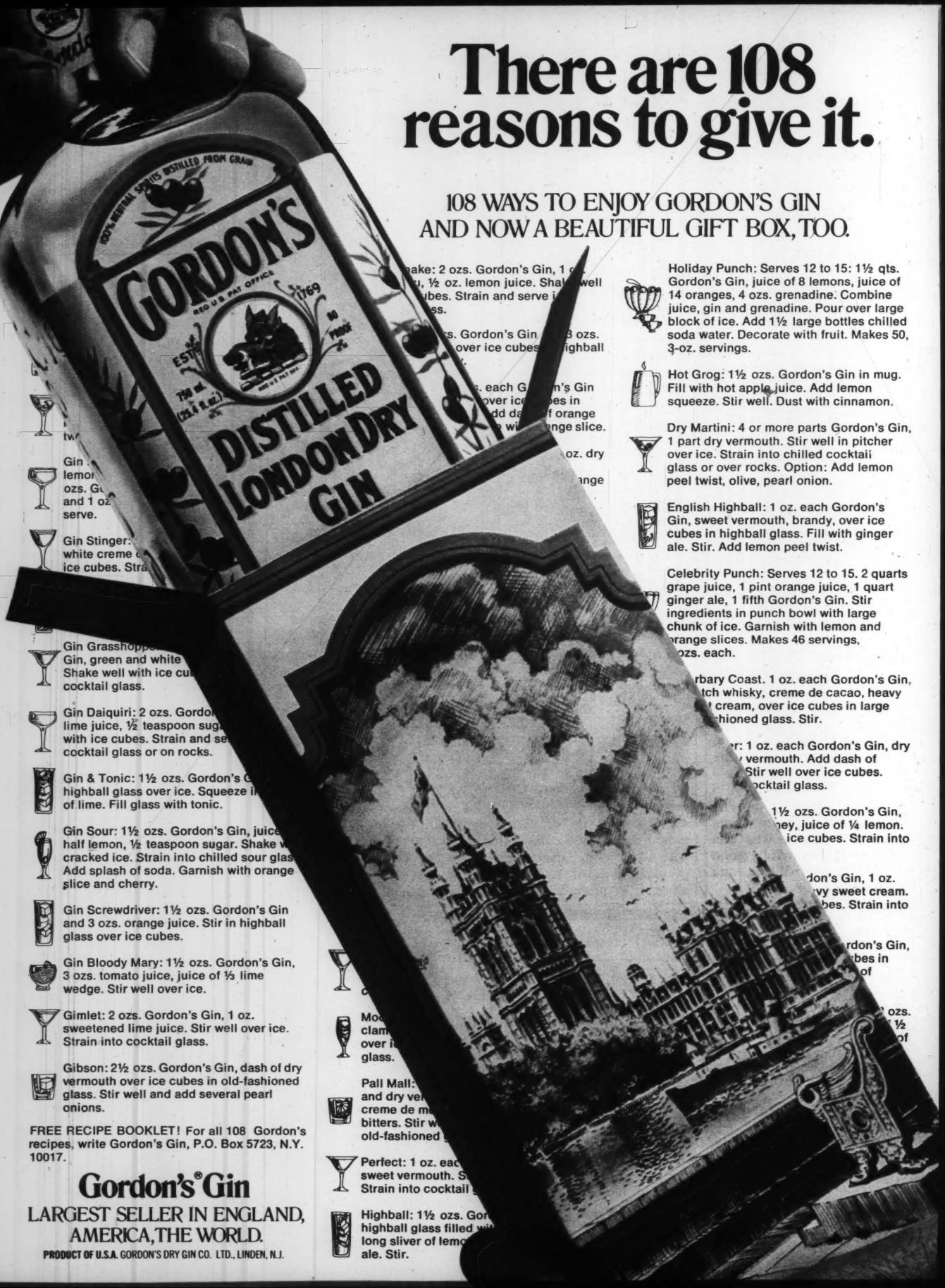

ake: 2 ozs. Gordon's Gin, 1 ...
..., ½ oz. lemon juice. Shak... well
...ubes. Strain and serve i...
...ss.

...s. Gordon's Gin ... 3 ozs.
... over ice cubes ... highball
...

...s. each G... n's Gin
... over ice ... bes in
... dd da... f orange
... wi... nge slice.

... oz. dry

...nge

Gin ...
lemo...
ozs. Gi...
and 1 oz...
serve.

Gin Stinger:
white creme ...
ice cubes. Stra...

Gin Grasshoppe...
Gin, green and white ...
Shake well with ice cu...
cocktail glass.

Gin Daiquiri: 2 ozs. Gordo...
lime juice, ½ teaspoon sug...
with ice cubes. Strain and se...
cocktail glass or on rocks.

Gin & Tonic: 1½ ozs. Gordon's G...
highball glass over ice. Squeeze i...
of lime. Fill glass with tonic.

Gin Sour: 1½ ozs. Gordon's Gin, juice...
half lemon, ½ teaspoon sugar. Shake w...
cracked ice. Strain into chilled sour glas...
Add splash of soda. Garnish with orange
slice and cherry.

Gin Screwdriver: 1½ ozs. Gordon's Gin
and 3 ozs. orange juice. Stir in highball
glass over ice cubes.

Gin Bloody Mary: 1½ ozs. Gordon's Gin,
3 ozs. tomato juice, juice of ⅓ lime
wedge. Stir well over ice.

Gimlet: 2 ozs. Gordon's Gin, 1 oz.
sweetened lime juice. Stir well over ice.
Strain into cocktail glass.

Gibson: 2½ ozs. Gordon's Gin, dash of dry
vermouth over ice cubes in old-fashioned
glass. Stir well and add several pearl
onions.

Holiday Punch: Serves 12 to 15: 1½ qts. Gordon's Gin, juice of 8 lemons, juice of 14 oranges, 4 ozs. grenadine. Combine juice, gin and grenadine. Pour over large block of ice. Add 1½ large bottles chilled soda water. Decorate with fruit. Makes 50, 3-oz. servings.

Hot Grog: 1½ ozs. Gordon's Gin in mug. Fill with hot apple juice. Add lemon squeeze. Stir well. Dust with cinnamon.

Dry Martini: 4 or more parts Gordon's Gin, 1 part dry vermouth. Stir well in pitcher over ice. Strain into chilled cocktail glass or over rocks. Option: Add lemon peel twist, olive, pearl onion.

English Highball: 1 oz. each Gordon's Gin, sweet vermouth, brandy, over ice cubes in highball glass. Fill with ginger ale. Stir. Add lemon peel twist.

Celebrity Punch: Serves 12 to 15. 2 quarts grape juice, 1 pint orange juice, 1 quart ginger ale, 1 fifth Gordon's Gin. Stir ingredients in punch bowl with large chunk of ice. Garnish with lemon and orange slices. Makes 46 servings, ...ozs. each.

...rbary Coast. 1 oz. each Gordon's Gin, ...tch whisky, creme de cacao, heavy ... cream, over ice cubes in large ...hioned glass. Stir.

...r: 1 oz. each Gordon's Gin, dry ... vermouth. Add dash of ... Stir well over ice cubes. ...ocktail glass.

... 1½ ozs. Gordon's Gin, ...ney, juice of ¼ lemon. ...ice cubes. Strain into

...don's Gin, 1 oz. ...vy sweet cream. ...bes. Strain into

...rdon's Gin, ...bes in ...of

... ozs. ... ½ ...of

Mo... clam... over i... glass.

Pall Mall: ... and dry ver... creme de m... bitters. Stir w... old-fashioned ...

Perfect: 1 oz. eac... sweet vermouth. S... Strain into cocktail ...

Highball: 1½ ozs. Gor... highball glass filled wi... long sliver of lemo... ale. Stir.

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BORING SCOOPS OF 1977: FIRST ANNUAL AWARDS

The Insider is proud to announce the recipients of its first annual Boring Scoop Awards:

Playboy: Aaron Latham revealed that Spiro Agnew liked to watch strippers, a bit of lint The Insider picked out two years ago.

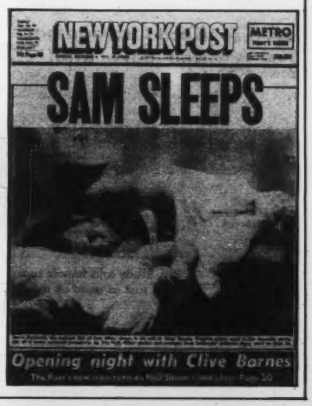
New York Times Magazine: In a brilliant exercise of subliminal hopscotch, Aaron Latham—hot on the trail of relevance once more—scoured through Hemingway's baby pictures and concluded that he was gay.

New York Post: Steve Dunleavy, still dripping with the blood of Sam's boy, revealed that Alice Crimmins was spending her weekends out of a Manhattan jail, lolling on a yacht off Long Island.

Newsweek: Just when things were looking grim, they hit us with—"Jewelry's New Dazzle."

And a very special Snoring Scoop to:

New York Post: For their big break on the world's most famous nerd:



Media

The Laff Biz: How Long Will You Stay Fresh in That Can?

John Pratt is always on the lookout for a good laugh. A "clean, solitary ho ho ho" will do, but the "hollow, hearty, huge and honest" kind is "nifty," says Pratt. "That rich, full sound really turns me on."

As president of Sound One, one of the only two "canned laughter" companies in the world, however, Pratt must not only know his own mind, but his customers' as well. He and his brother and their laugh machine (an 11" × 11" × 26" box with drawers-full of assorted laughs) regularly "sweeten" about 20 network sit-coms and a good dose of television variety shows and specials.

The laughs vary in length—from one-half second to ten seconds; in intensity—from a low, rolling, passive chortle to a screamy laugh; and in pacing. "If a guy has a pie in his hand, the audience knows what's going to happen. So they all laugh at once. With intellectual jokes the laughter grows. People get them at different times."

Laughs are also categorized by age—a show keyed to teenagers requires a cheery, whistley, bombastic, high-pitched laugh, whereas an adult audience laughs intimately—and by color. Says Pratt, "Black laughter has a different sound than white laughter." Translation: it's a little *thinner*.

When a show is finally edited, the front or back end of a laugh, or an entire laugh, has oftentimes been cut out. Pratt fills in these holes, cleans up the bumps, creating a nice, complete laugh with an ascending and descending end.

"I don't want to make this out to sound like brain surgery," says Pratt, "but by smoothing out the laughs, filling in the dead space between jokes, I change the pace of the show and help people at home laugh."

"Not to insult people's intelligence," he adds quickly. "You know, many critics have done a real down number on canned laughter. Given it a real negative connotation. Personally, I don't give a diddley damn what the, think." •

—Debra Weiner

Seventies

Whither Political Humor? Say Ten Rising Comics: Withered

"Audiences don't take to political humor very easily," observes Mike Shapiro, a satirist trying to break in at the Improv, one of New York's comedy showcase clubs (see page 40). "I find myself going for the easy-listening stuff."

While Lenny Bruce is revered and Mort Sahl is respected, Robert Klein and Steve Martin appear to be the role models for struggling young comics; sex, drugs, advertising, TV and ethnics are the targets of the day. Why no political jokes? Some comics don't think politics lends itself to humor these days, some don't think the audiences will get the jokes, and some don't understand the news well enough to joke about it.

PICTORIAL PARADE

Will Rogers: They had politics *then*

Chris Albrecht, the owner-manager of the Improv, sees political comedy as operating in cycles. "There are periods when it works and when it doesn't. Audiences were burned out by Nixon, and now we're in a downward phase."

"Comics would rather hone their routines than explore a lot of new turf," says Richard Belzer, a promising regular at Catch a Rising Star, another New York club. For an unknown trying to perfect a timeless TV routine, politics isn't worth the effort. "Unless you're a real fast writer," says Melanie Chartoff, a singer/comic now working at L. A.'s Improv, "topical stuff is extinct in a week or two."

Another problem is audience alienation—people tend to take politics seriously, if they consider it at all. "When you do politics, you tend to favor one side of the audience over the other," says David Sayh, another Catch favorite. "I don't want to offend or alienate anyone."

But David Brenner may have summed up the situation best: "One night a guy came over and said I was very hip that night. Then he asked how many people I thought I had reached. I said about two or three percent. He told me to keep them, and he would work the other 97 percent."

—Andy Gilman

WIDE WORLD

Lenny: And they had politics *then*

DECADE

Neil Young's Greatest Recordings on one specially priced 3-record set, featuring 4 previously unreleased songs.

After the Gold Rush
Cinnamon Girl
Southern Man
Down to the Wire
Burned
Mr. Soul
Broken Arrow
Expecting to Fly

Sugar Mountain
I Am a Child
The Loner
The Old Laughing Lady
Down by the River
Cowgirl in the Sand
I Believe in You
Helpless
Ohio
Soldier

Old Man
A Man Needs a Maid
Harvest
Heart of Gold
Star of Bethlehem
The Needle and the Damage Done
Tonight's the Night (Part I)
Tired Eyes

Walk On
For the Turnstiles
Winterlong
Deep Forbidden Lake
Like a Hurricane
Love Is a Rose
Cortez the Killer
Campaigner
Long May You Run

On Reprise records & tapes.

Hey Mom! There's some Bowery bum on the phone claiming to be Santa Claus!

MOVIE STAR NEWS

Santa speaks to the world: "Hello girls!"

You better watch out
You better not cry
You better not pout, I'm telling you why
Santa Claus is phoning tonight

He's making a call
And taping it, too
For $9.95 he'll send it to you
Santa Claus is phoning tonight

Yes, parents, this year you can give your children a Christmas present they'll never forget. For a mere $4.95, Sears will arrange a three-minute phone call from the North Pole directly to your home, between December 23–26. You pick the day! You pick the time!

And that's not all! For an additional $9.95, they'll send you a cassette recording of the event, to be played over and over again. So don't delay, act today! This offer expires December 21.

"*Oh, Billy, Santa's on the phone.*"

"*Tell him to call back after Donny and Marie.*"

Sit-Coms Sink and a New Sun Rises in the West: Volleyball

Betty White: Sit-com's Pacific fleet sinks

Network executives out on the Coast are busily scratching their blonde toupees, trying to figure out what has gone wrong with the old sit-com. The canned stuff, which is usually dreamed up on hillside terraces between ingesting one mind-reducing drug or another, just isn't working out, with such new shows as *Betty White*, *Busting Loose* and *The San Pedro Beach Bums* already slated for burial, and standbys such as *Rhoda*, *MASH* and *Maude* showing signs of losing their appeal in the ratings.

With millions in advertising bills at stake, the network wizards, who don't seem so Merlinesque these days, are considering alternatives for sit-coms after this dreary comedic season. One sign of the desperation is an all-out search on the part of some execs for a "New Sport"—some live competition which will give the public the genuine thrills so lacking in the canned comedies.

One idea now being touted is the introduction of two-person volleyball for television. The producer working on the project, who wishes to remain anonymous, sees armies of cameras shooting the games at Venice's Muscle Beach or in Malibu.

"It's live drama, which is what's happening now," the volleyball visionary says. "It's like football, watching two big behemoths knocking the shit out of each other, now that's fun. It's the ultimate California sport, a *Charlie's Angels* kind of thing. You get good looking people in bathing suits. You've got sun and surf, and what a background! It's got potential."—*Joel Kotkin*

What Strange Curse?

1977 AND NEW TIMES: FIRST KELLGREN, THEN RENAISSANCE...

The November 25 issue of *New Times* was on the stands in Turners Falls, Massachusetts, with its article on Renaissance, a local commune. The story discussed the long-running feud between the group and local residents, predicting violence. One local resident was quoted: "Someday there's going to be a mighty big fire over there . . . of uncertain origin."

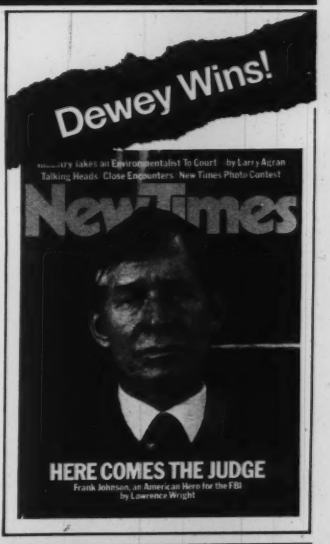
A few miles away, at the commune's center in Gill, a large renovated barn, housing the crafts workshops, was burning.

Renaissance had bunked in the Berkshires for a number of years before settling in Gill, where the group soon enraged locals by staging raucous rock concerts and announcing that all 250 of its members would eventually come there to roost.

Despite the opposition, Renaissance persevered. "We're not saying we're not going to win," one communard observed, "we're saying that we're going to live like this—regardless of who likes it or not."

Shortly after midnight on November 30, the two-story barn caught fire. Seven fire departments responded, but were hampered by the remoteness of the rural location; water had to be pumped in from Dry Brook, a half mile away. The barn was destroyed, and a spokesman for Renaissance estimated the damage at $71,000.

It was the end—or at least a major detour—for commune leader Rapunzel's dream of a New Age community; but for many residents of Gill, it was a dream come true. The State Fire Marshall's office is now attempting to determine whether the blaze was providential or planned. –*Craig Waters*


Dewey Wins!
Talking Heads Close Encounters New Times Photo Contest
New Times
HERE COMES THE JUDGE
Frank Johnson, an American Hero for the FBI
by Lawrence Wright

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The horizon of jazz has never looked better. And with more jazz albums meeting with better success and bigger audiences everyday it looks like it's finally here to stay.

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Their way.

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Horizon

Produced by Ed Michel and John Snyder | Produced by Elliot Mendelson | Produced by Don Sebesky | Produced by John Snyder

COMEDY

"We need a really funny cover to get the point across that this is a *comedy* issue."

"What about Martin Mull? He's funny."

"Not enough people know who he is. How about Belushi — we could have him samuraiing a smile button."

"That's great!!"

"No, that's dumb. What about making him Samurai Santa?"

"Yeah, and we can have him hacking up a little kid on his lap."

"Why does it have to be Belushi, anyway? He's not even in the issue."

"What about having Barbra Streisand on the cover with a wasp on her nose?"

"What's funny about that?"

"What's funny about Streisand with a wasp on her nose? Are you kidding? With her eyes crossed? It would be great."

"How about Mull hitting his thumb with a hammer? And the theme could be, 'Comedy Hurts.'"

"No, no! Belushi samuraiing his own hand!"

"I'm not sure a lopped-off hand is the funniest possible image."

"How about a dead fish?"

"I've got it—the Coneheads! We'll put the Coneheads on the cover, with the cones going through the logo."

"No, they're out of town. We couldn't shoot the picture in time."

"We could have the words 'Special Comedy Issue' stamped right on the cones."

"Why *Saturday Night?* Isn't anything else funny?"

"What about Gilda as a Conehead?"

"She was just on the cover four months ago. Maybe it's too soon."

"Why don't we put a Conehead in a pencil sharpener?"

"Look, we can't *get* the Coneheads. They're out of town. Forget them."

"Why don't we have the Coneheads holding ice cream cones upside down, so the ice cream is running down their hands, and they're biting into the points of the cones?"

"What about that picture of Sadat, with the swastika tie?"

"The tie is good, but we could make it really funny if we made Sadat into a Conehead."

"Why don't we get three old Jewish ladies on a park bench, and call them Cohen-heads..."

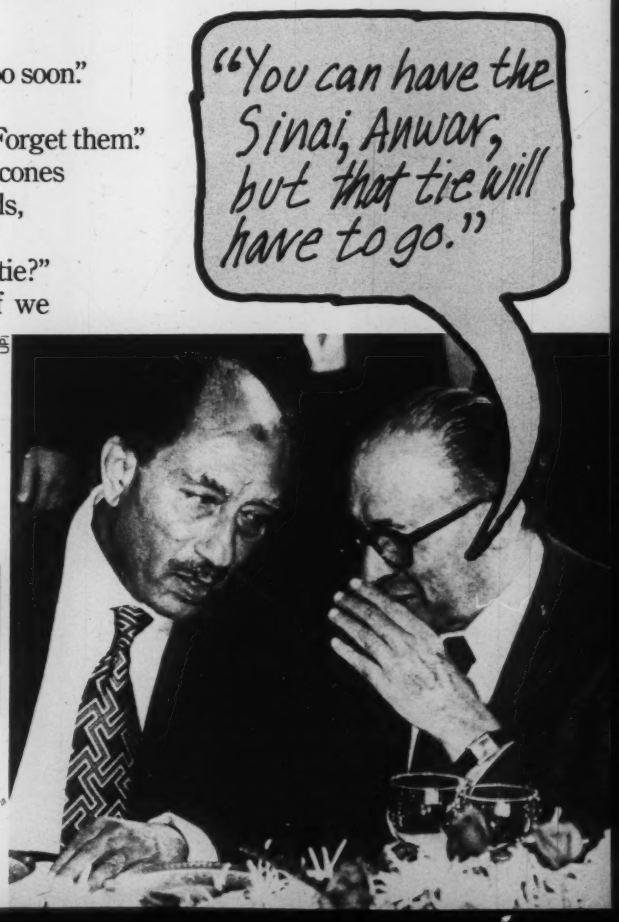
"You must be kidding."

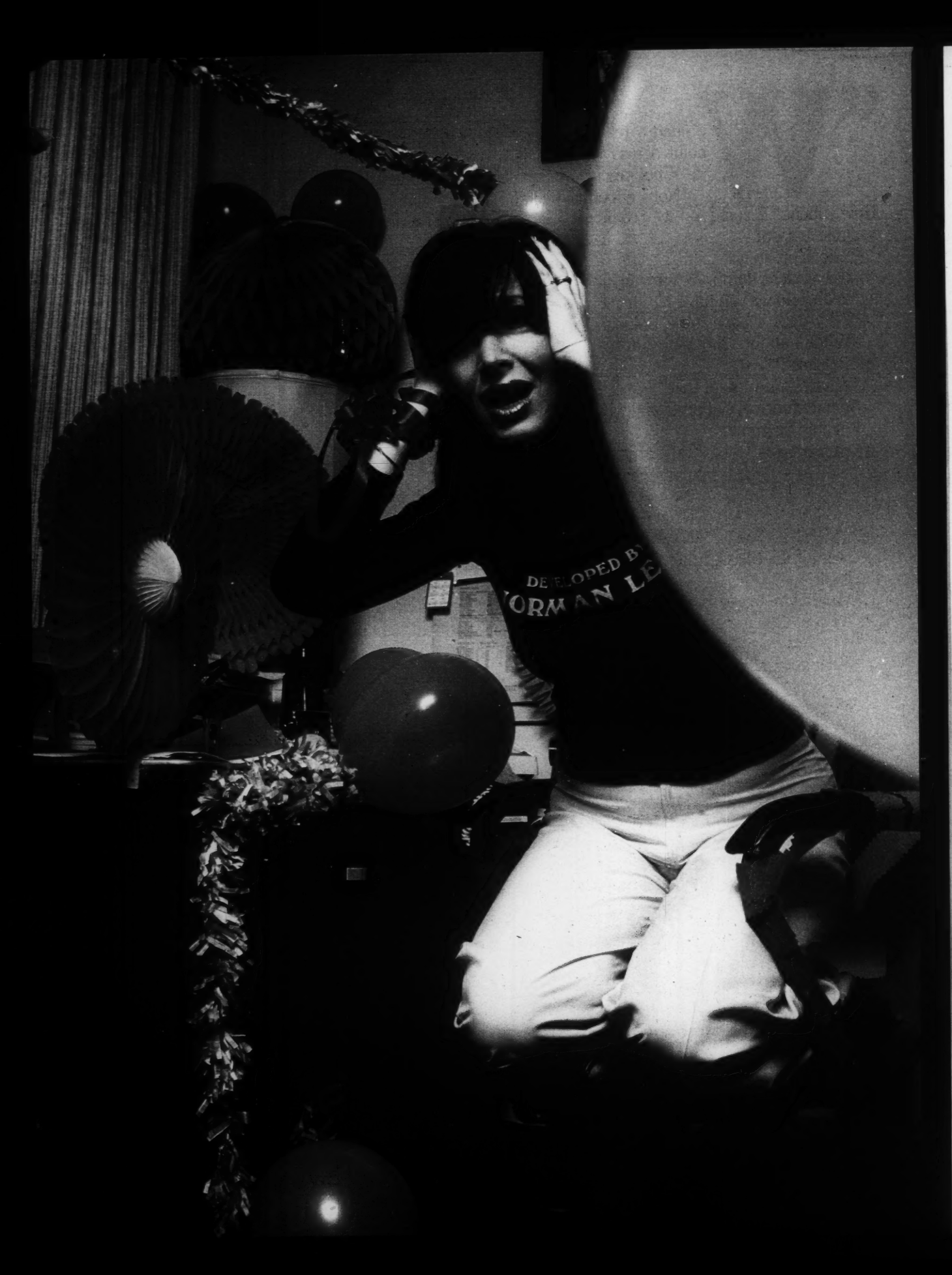
"...or three blacks, the Coonheads."

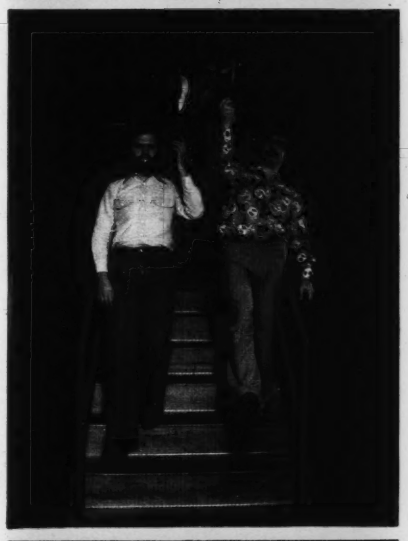
"*Come on.*"

"Well, it looks like it's back to Mull."

"Hey! Why don't we do Mull as a Conehead?"







Yes, we have some bananas: Stein and Illes perfect a very old joke. Eugenie Ross-Leming: From Second City to Fernwood by way of L.A.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DOROTHY TANOUS

The Hollywood Laugh Track

For young sit-com writers, "the money's too good to worry about minor details like integrity"

by Sam Merrill

At first I thought it was the lack of aplomb with which she greeted the cockroach that stuck its head out of one of the holes in the Jarlsberg. But that wasn't it. Then I thought perhaps her accent wasn't right. But no, a New York writer is permitted to refer to her mother's sister as an *ahhhnt* rather than an *ant*, providing, of course, that she draws the mid-Atlantic line of demarcation safely to the west of *eye*-ther and toe-*mah*-toe. Actually, it wasn't until she began hitting on the slender man sipping a Schlitz by the refrigerator that it became indisputable: the round-faced girl in the denim culottes and high French boots was an out-of-towner.

"How old are you?" she opened.

"Twenty-nine."

"You look younger. You must live a boring life."

Age? Appearance? How gauche. Affairs between New York literati have been known to proceed for months before either party discusses anything but sexual preferences and JFK assassination theories. Yet I'd suspected her of not really belonging at the party from the moment I saw her. It was more a look than an attitude or accent. She appeared sort of . . . well, healthy. Then the host told me who she was and it all came together.

Creative writing teachers, small-town reporters, Chicago and San Francisco novelists have struggled for years to simulate the New York literary pallor. But none succeed. The ashen, soulful, almost tubercular gaze that peers out at the world from a thousand book jackets apparently cannot be duplicated by merely avoiding sunlight. One must also avoid moonlight, starlight, sunburned women, men in leisure suits and an atmosphere in which oxygen is anything more than a trace element. So Sybil Adelman, Hollywood comedy writer, stood out at the West Side novelist's New Year's Eve party like a visitor from Mars.

"What do you look like nude?" was her opener to me.

Unable to come up with a witty rejoinder, I feigned insult.

She feigned contrition.

We proceeded from there.

Sybil, who has scripted many of the highest-rated situation comedies, including *Rhoda* and *Mary Tyler Moore*, told me she'd come to New York to get away from television. "I want to write films and articles, maybe a book," she explained. "But if I stayed in Hollywood, I'd have kept on doing half-hour episodes at $5,000 each. There's too much work out there. And too much money. But I don't need it anymore. I've found I can live on $50,000 a year."

Sybil's age, about 30—my age—was even more perplexing than her economics. I'd always visualized family sit-coms as being written by 50-year-old men—family men— and an occasional 50-year-old woman (Rose Marie?); people who'd been raised on Will Rogers' newspaper column, on ticker-tape parades, fireside chats and war news from Europe. Not on *I Love Lucy*. The notion that people who'd been raised on television were now creating the television that would raise others seemed oddly disorienting.

"What's it like?" I asked; not my most incisive question, but she got the idea.

"TV writers are the lowest," Sybil began in the tone of detached intimacy that Eve Arden perfected and Bea Arthur's Maude occasionally manages to duplicate. "You can't even talk. I started out as Carl Reiner's secretary and then I could say anything I wanted. If I thought

Gail Parent, Gail Parent: On a book tour for *David Meyer*, the interest centered on *Mary Hartman*

No, it is *not* Neil Simon: Frustrated screenwriter Kenny Solms starts work on "Chatting with Goldie"

a script was shitty, I'd tell him and he'd usually ask for a rewrite. But as soon as I became one of his writers, I couldn't say anything. Then, even if I told him one of my *own* scripts was bad, he'd say, 'What do you know?' "

"Didn't it bother you to be treated so shabbily?"

"Naw. The money is too good to worry about minor details like integrity. I wrote a *New Dick Van Dyke Show* in which the kid comes home to find his parents having sex on the living room sofa. The network wouldn't do it, so Carl and Dick left CBS over my script. They were saying things like, 'This is a matter of principle. We can't give in.' And I was saying, 'Hey, what are you talking about? Let's sell out.' "

Sybil said she got started as a comedy writer by "watching another writer drive up to Carl's house in a Mercedes, click across the room in Gucci loafers, then pull a script out of a Louis Vuitton briefcase. I said to myself, 'Hey, that looks like a good job.' So I grabbed a partner, Barbara Gallagher, a former special assistant to Fred Silverman, and we began writing comedy shows—and selling them. We were a perfect team: she was cute and I was funny. We were a smash."

The longer we talked, the more frequently Sybil's eyes flicked away from mine to speed-read the social scene over my left shoulder. But I held her there with boorish prattle. The world she described seemed strange, exotic. A million questions flooded my brain. It's not every day one gets to meet a visitor from Mars.

"Tell me, exactly how does a freelance writer like you . . . or me . . ." (by New Year's, Dr. Frank Field had already predicted that the winter of '77 would be the coldest in New York history; I pictured myself sipping a Coors on the sun deck of a Malibu beach house and decided that I, too, could probably learn to live on $50,000 a year) " . . . go about doing a half-hour script?"

"It's easy. You go in with a bunch of story ideas, they pick one they like, turn on a tape recorder and tell you exactly how to write it. Then you go home, listen to the tape, type it up and fill in the spaces where the jokes go. When you're finished typing, you bring it back and they give you a lot of money."

"That's it? That's how TV comedy gets written?"

"No, that's how TV writers get paid. Nobody knows how TV comedy gets written. After your script is accepted, you tune in to watch the show and all the lines are different. Last fall, I did a script for *All's Fair* that I thought was really funny. When I handed it in I told them, 'I like everything in here except this one joke which is kind of dumb. Maybe you could punch it up for me.' They said, 'Don't worry about anything. The script is great.' But when it was aired every single line was completely changed except for that one dumb joke. And the next day they called to offer me another script.

"I was on one variety show where all the writers got together to figure out who wrote what and discovered nobody had written any of it."

Sybil was getting desperate. She pretended to wave to someone across the room, broadly mouthed the words "Be there in a minute."

"Say you're washing cars on Sunset Boulevard and you're the funniest person in the world, so you walk into a producer's office and ask for a job. He can't hire you. But if you've been fired from three variety shows and wrote for a cancelled sit-com, he'll just snap you right up"

"Just one more question: Are there many young comedy writers in Hollywood now?"

"Yeah, lots of them. With all that work and all that money, young writers have been arriving from the East in herds."

"How are they doing?"

"Many of them are doing great. Of course, there's usually a brief period of adjustment during which the idealistic *artiste* learns to prostitute his integrity with an easy grace. That initial period is commonly called 'paying your dues.' But from there on in, it's smooth sailing."

Sybil slipped away from me, was silently absorbed by the party. From far away, I heard Eve Arden ask the best-selling author of a Kennedy assassination book what he looked like nude.

I said nothing for a while, drifted from bar to buffet table considering the effect of this new information on a theory I've stubbornly clung to for the better part of a decade: that the American counterculture, circa 1969, sprang not from the writings of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs, but from the television sit-coms of the late fifties and early sixties. Whatever craziness might have been going on in our own homes, we could always tune to *Father Knows Best*, *Make Room for Daddy* and *Leave It to Beaver*, hear Jim Anderson, Danny Thomas and Ward Cleaver dispense the kind of solid, McCarthy-era advice a growing child could depend on.

Then the Vietnam War arrived and brought with it the ultimate disillusionment: Jim Anderson and Ward Cleaver were full of shit. TV was our literature, our babysitter, our make-believe friend. The TV families were our families and I have come to look upon The Revolution as a pan-generational, electric-speed decision *not* to grow up to be Robert Young.

But the values of The Revolution have slid so far back into our cultural history that today they wait only for the right promoter to come along and market them as nostalgia. Former counterculture types—now in their late twenties and early thirties—have become bankers, corporate attorneys, even military contractors. So why not TV comedy writers? Why shouldn't the generation that was raised by television's surrogate sit-com families return in the end like Ryan O'Neal to a tearful Ray Milland? Being American means never having to remember your past.

At five to twelve, somebody turned on the television and there they were, the electronic images of New Year's Eve: Guy Lombardo, Times Square, the globe of light atop the Allied Chemical tower. Of course, we'd seen it all innumerable times before; yet most of the guests at the party suspended their conversations to peer into the little box at the far end of the room, watch the New Year *really* happen, *officially*—on TV.

By midnight, I had definitely decided to make my pilgrimage to Hollywood. I wanted to meet the people Sybil had told me about, those children of the counterculture who were now creating the fictional families that would raise the next very real generation of Americans. Clearly, this was a mission of grave sociological importance.

Secretly, I hoped it would also become a mission of personal importance.

The travel agent requested my departure date.

"January 11."

While she was tearing through her *Domestic Airline Travel Guide*, I decided that TV comedy writing couldn't possibly be *that* amoral. In fact, it was probably fun. Easy fun. And a Malibu beach house couldn't cost any more than a good-sized co-op in SoHo.

"And when will you be returning to New York?"

" . . . Just make it one-way."

My Hollywood tour guide was Brandon Tartikoff, an old friend from underground newspaper days who is now director of comedy at NBC. After a traffic jam on the freeway, an overpriced din-

RECYCLED

EDGAR WINTER TURNS OVER A NEW LEAF (WITH THE HELP OF SOME OLD FRIENDS).

Edgar Winter's White Trash, one of rock's legendary groups, was one of the first bands to successfully merge rock 'n' roll with rhythm and blues. Now Edgar has reformed White Trash with most of its original members. The result, as you might expect, is overflowing with energy. It is also a tight, sophisticated brand of rockin' soul, with the vocals more fluid and expressive than ever before. Their new album, "Recycled," and their spectacular live performances are sure to reacquaint America with one of the most stylish and influential musical groups ever.

"Recycled" means reborn. Edgar Winter's White Trash. On Blue Sky Records and Tapes.

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ner and a lousy night's sleep, Brandon called at 6 a.m.

"We're having breakfast at Nate n' Al's Delicatessen in Beverly Hills and we've got to be there by 7:30."

"Why?"

"You'll see."

We made it by 7:15. "This is it," Brandon announced cryptically. "This is where your story begins."

The surroundings—at least to me, a born-in-Brooklyn, raised-on-Long-Island Jew—were surprisingly familiar. In fact, Nate n' Al's was exactly like every kosher deli in New York except that the Jews were brown and the mustard was yellow.

"See that table in the back corner?"

"Yeah." Six elderly men in brightly colored leisure suits gulped coffee, chatted, chewed and smoked long, green cigars, read *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*.

"How old do you think they are?"

"Mid-70s. Maybe the little guy in the red pants is 80."

"The oldest man at that table is 63. Two of them are under 55."

"Jesus. Who are they?"

He told me, but the names were unfamiliar. "They're comedy writers. Very successful. But that's what TV comedy does to you. It burns you up."

"They meet here every morning?"

"Yeah. It's kind of a breakfast club. They gossip, read the trades, try out new material."

"You mean they're telling jokes right now?"

"Probably."

"Then how come nobody's laughing?"

"Old comedy writers never laugh. They say, 'That's funny.'"

"They stop laughing and they get burned up early. Sounds like a terrific life."

"That's why most of the young writers you'll meet will tell you they really want to produce. The demands of writing a weekly comedy show are just too great. Some people, if they're facile enough, can get through a few years of it. But eventually they run down, burn out, and at that point they either move on to producing or get eaten alive."

"I guess a lot of comedy writers end up quitting the business."

"Are you kidding? Nobody can afford to quit. You'll see. Even the people our age who used to drive old VWs—they come out here, sell one script, and immediately they're paying off a new Mercedes and have a 20-year mortgage on a beach house. So they've got to keep writing if they can't produce. You don't make this kind of money outside television."

"But if a comedy writer *really* burns out, I mean, if he's just not funny anymore, don't the producers stop hiring him?"

"No. Hollywood is like Harvard. Once you're accepted, you can't flunk out."

At 8 a.m., the six elderly middle-aged writers paid their bill and left. A snatch of conversation, borne on a cloud of blue cigar smoke, wafted over our table. " . . . Then she says, 'How often would we have sex?' And he says, 'Infrequently.' So she says, 'Tell me, is that one word or two?'" "That's funny . . ."

After breakfast, Brandon checked into his Burbank office. I checked into the nearest American Express storefront, and purchased my return ticket to New York.

"If I'd stayed in Hollywood I'd have kept on doing half-hour episodes at $5,000 each. There's too much work out there. And too much money. But I don't need it anymore. I've found I can live on $50,000 a year"

Wherever I went in southern California, everyone who'd had even the faintest association with the counterculture remembered Bob Illes and J. R. Stein. Between September 1968 and June 1972, *The Stein and Illes Show* on KUSC-FM was probably the most sophisticated, most consistently original, flat-out funniest underground radio program in America. If Jean Shepherd and Paul Krassner had been Siamese twins, they'd have done *The Stein and Illes Show*.

Today, Bob Illes and J. R. Stein are TV comedy writers, so I figured they'd be about as good a starting point as I was likely to find; legitimate underground heroes who'd moved their act uptown.

Brandon gave me their office number, but when I dialed it, a woman answered in a voice only slightly less stylized than Lily Tomlin's switchboard receptionist: "Good afternoon, *Captain & Tennille* show. Can I help you?"

After arranging a lunch date for the following day, I couldn't resist asking J. R. what the hell two former underground stalwarts were doing writing *The Captain & Tennille*.

"It's good. . . " he answered, using the old horse racing expression I later came to recognize as the single most important phrase in the TV industry, " . . . for our track record."

"I see," I said, but didn't. At the time, the peculiar significance of those two words was lost on me.

We met at ABC Prospect, a studio located, both literally and figuratively, on the Lower East Side of Hollywood. Bob Illes and J. R. Stein looked suspiciously funky for a couple of network regulars. J. R. was smallish, had a semi-kempt, rust-colored beard, wore a plain sport shirt opened—gratefully—only at the top button, jeans and sneakers. Bob was taller, wore a shaggy mustache and an old cowboy shirt that was at least 300 rhinestones shy of qualifying for Glen Campbell's wardrobe.

In the parking lot we made small talk about restaurants; J. R. mentioned a local Mexican joint that was definitely out. "Colitis," he confessed. I immediately recognized his sensitivity, humanity and intelligence, qualities that have been scientifically proven to cause that particular gastric affliction.

"OK with me." I told him. "I have colitis, too."

But our rapport vanished the moment they did their first number as a comedy team.

"You're driving, aren't you?" Bob asked.

"Might as well," J. R. replied. "My car's right here."

Bob waited at the passenger door of a rusted-out Rambler while J. R. fumbled with a wad of keys.

"I'll have it in a minute."

"No rush."

Two-three-four . . . Then both of them burst out laughing simultaneously.

I didn't get the joke.

"Here we go," J. R. gasped hysterically, flicking the switch that automatically unlocked all four doors of his glistening white Mercedes-Benz 450SE.

Apparently, the image of a Hollywood writer driving a battered old car is, to Californians, so patently absurd the mere thought of it is cause for spontaneous hilarity. Yet it seemed natural enough to me. In New York, some of the world's greatest authors drive old bombs (three years ago a friend of mine sold his partly decomposed '62 Chevy to Joseph Heller).

After the giggling had subsided, Bob and J. R. selected a restaurant called the Dresden Room, which I assumed would be decorated with either porcelain statues or charred Nazis. But it was just a prefabricated steak pub in leather suspenders. We ate, I drank—J. R. was unmoved by my argument that alcohol is a good disinfectant for open wounds in the alimentary canal—and Stein and Illes told me the brief saga of their collective life.

It was your basic rags-to-riches story, with the rags part telescoped down to about a week and a half. Actually, they got their first big network job in January 1971, six months before graduating from USC—a special for Tennessee Ernie Ford. "We were lucky," Bob recalls. "Most writers have to wait until they're through with school before learning to sell out."

For the next year, Stein and Illes commuted between straight and subter-

PHOTO COURTESY OF JEFFREY BARRON

Bob Hope's comedy doctor: Jeffrey Barron is on 24-hour call

ranean worlds, continuing their underground radio program while writing a syndicated game show for TV. But in June 1972, with the rest of the counterculture crumbling around them, *The Stein and Illes Show* was canceled. Within a month, they were hired as staff writers on *The New Bill Cosby Show* and the rest, as Sybil Adelman would say, was smooth sailing.

Between the appetizer and the main course, Bob Illes handed me their resume. It was crammed with work. Some of it was excellent (in '73 they won Emmies for a Lily Tomlin special), some interesting (in '74 they created *Joe & Sons*, a promising sit-com that for 13 weeks in '75 fought a losing battle against *Welcome Back, Kotter*), but mostly Stein and Illes have wasted their considerable talents on irredeemable garbage (*Phyllis Diller's 102nd Birthday Party; The Third Annual Unofficial Miss Las Vegas Showgirl Pageant; The Sonny Bono Comedy Revue; The Captain & Tennille*).

One of their credits intrigued me: a stint as co-story editors on Norman Lear's *One Day at a Time*. J. R. offered the following inside account of life with Lear. "There's no schmoozing, no kibbitzing. Nobody's funny. And with nine shows on the air, Norman's lieutenants have to do most of the work for him. That's why his shows keep getting worse."

Bob cleared his throat like Ethel Mertz reminding Lucy not to open the closet door until Ricky has left the room.

"When you say Lear's shows keep getting worse, do you mean . . ."

"I think I've said enough about Norman Lear."

He was probably right.

Then we discussed money. As staff writers on a one-hour variety show, Stein and Illes were each making $1,750 a week. It was apparent that although money has become considerably more important to both of them than either had imagined it would, for Stein it is a romance, while Illes and money are just very good friends.

Over coffee, the conversation drifted around to future plans. Stein said he hoped they'd soon be doing "something our peers will be interested in. Because of our track record, we've almost gotten to the point where we can do what we want."

"Forgive me, but looking over this resume, most of the shows you've done have either been lousy or gotten low ratings—or both."

"I didn't say, 'Because of our past successes.' I said, 'Because of our track record.' "

"What's the difference?"

"It all counts on your track record. The good, the bad and the vomitous. The more you work, the closer you get to the top."

"Yesterday morning, somebody told me you couldn't flunk out of Hollywood. I guess that's true."

"Sure. You keep failing and you keep working. And every time you're fired and move on, it improves your track record so the next job becomes easier to get."

"I'm beginning to understand."

"Say you're washing cars on Sunset Boulevard and you're the funniest person in the world, so you walk into a producer's office and ask for a job. He can't hire you because you have no track record. But if you walk into a producer's office and aren't funny at all, but have been fired from two variety shows, done three pilots that were never aired and wrote episodes on a sit-com that was canceled, he'll snap you up."

"You can't flunk out of Hollywood. You keep failing and you keep working"

"Because of your track record."

"Exactly."

"And because you and Bob have had enough quick disasters interspersed with your good work to create an impressive track record, you now feel almost ready to do . . . what? The TV version of your old radio show?"

"Probably not. But we are working on a pilot for NBC that will be a satirical *60 Minutes*. That project is a lot closer to our old stuff than anything we've done on television so far."

"What do you think the chances are of getting it on the air?"

J. R. shrugged.

Bob said, "Well, after this piece comes out, we know Norman Lear won't buy it."

Ray Jessel, the head writer of *Captain & Tennille*, is a gentle, intelligently spoken man with a silver Isro loosely fashioned after Harpo Marx's fright wig. Jessel smiled benignly as his three comedy teams—Stein and Illes, Ripps and Sant, Kelley and Geiger—ran totally, outrageously, hilariously amok. It surprised me that no one was taping the conference or taking shorthand notes. Their bits were screaming by in such hysterically rapid fire, I feared some of the lines would be forgotten by the time they began writing.

So this was a real live TV comedy writers' meeting. I was deeply impressed; not even Dick Van Dyke, Morey Amsterdam and Rose Marie were this funny. I wondered why, if the meetings were so brilliant, the show was so wretched.

Then Ray Jessel explained it all. "OK. OK. Free time's over," he said, calming his minions with an upturned palm. "Now let's get serious and write the show."

Bruce Vilanch is a member of a small minority. Not because he is a 250-pound Jewish bisexual of French extraction. Because he was a writer first and a TV comedy writer second. For five years, Bruce Vilanch did special features for the *Chicago Tribune*. And now, at 29, after less than two years in Hollywood, he is already considered one of television's classiest, most intellectual writers.

Brandon cautioned against unrealistic expectations. "In this business, if you've heard of Bernard Malamud you're an intellectual. And if you've heard of Thomas Pynchon you're an academic."

Bruce Vilanch had heard of both of them, but was a classification unto himself.

"You must be from the East," said the tiny mouth under wire-rim glasses and a huge pumpkin of hair.

"How can you tell?"

"You're not smiling." Bruce Vilanch wore an absurdly misshapen Nathan's T-shirt, had his shoes off and his feet up, was typing a script and fiddling with a straw at the same time. "People start smiling as they cross the Hudson, and by the time you hit Utah you can't take two steps without somebody telling you to have a nice day."

Something about his cadence and intonation was immediately, frighteningly familiar. I knew him, yet we had never met. "Haven't we . . . I mean, I'm sure I know your voice from somewhere."

"You do. I'm Bette Midler."

That was it. Bruce Vilanch *was* Bette Midler. I tried to handle the situation professionally but sounded instead like Clete Mizenheimer covering a warehouse fire in Fernwood, Ohio. "Tell me, Bruce. How did you happen to become Bette Midler?"

"It was kind of the other way around. Back in Chicago, when I was writing for the *Trib*, Bette was opening for Jackie Vernon at Mr. Kelley's. We met, I started writing material for her, and the whole 'Divine Miss M' character began to develop. Then she went back to the Baths to try out the new act, and the rest, as they say, is show-biz history. I've been writing for her ever since."

"How did you become a journalist?"

"I studied journalism at Ohio State, liked it and took the job at the *Trib*. But I was never what you'd call a serious newsman. Which is how I got into comedy writing. Sometimes, while doing these little Rex Reedy interviews, people would say, 'Gee, you're funny. Could you write me some material?' I did that for David Steinberg and Lily Tomlin, and they recommended me to others. Eventually, I was writing for over 30 people. Now I'm one of the 18,000 peo-

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"This group is going to permanently alter the medium" : Hudson Marquez' TVTV group split after one NBC show

ple writing a movie for Joan Rivers."

"But you're also one of the six people writing *The Brady Bunch Variety Hour*. Doesn't the mediocrity of that show bother you?"

" 'Mediocrity?' You're too kind. The show is abysmal. An embarrassment. A blot on the electronic landscape . . . Shall I continue? One interesting observation about *The Brady Bunch* is that with every other program I've worked on, there was at least one person, however misguided, who truly believed it was going to be a good show. *The Brady Bunch* is an exception. Here, nobody feels that way."

"Then why are you doing it? For the money?"

"Yes, but also because unless you're working for somebody like Lily or Richie Pryor, it doesn't matter what show you're on. It's the same fucking show."

"Is there anything you *wouldn't* do?"

"I once worked on a Monty Hall special and I'll never do that again. Everybody was 112 years old saying, 'Let's do the sketch we wrote for Gleason in '53.' It was like being stuck forever in act one of *The Sunshine Boys*."

"So what's the answer?"

"Be a hit."

"You mean like Woody Allen and Mel Brooks?"

"Right. After he's had a hit in the movies, a comedy writer is allowed the measure of freedom necessary to express himself, to make the kind of picture he wants. Until he flops. There's only one answer in Hollywood. Be a hit. Because everything else is *The Brady Bunch*."

Bruce thought it would be fitting to eat at Denny's, the neighborhood fast-food franchise Norman Lear had recently purchased. While crossing Sunset Boulevard against the light (Bruce said he enjoyed committing small crimes in L.A., it made him feel like he was back in Chicago), I asked if he thought TV comedy was funnier in the "Golden Age" than it is today.

"Definitely. People from Broadway, radio and the Catskills were writing TV then, so there was a lot of terrific vaudeville schtick. Today you get comedy by computer."

"Why?"

"Because TV moved to Hollywood at precisely the time the double feature disappeared from motion pictures. So all those B-movie people were out here with nothing to do, and they took over television. In New York, the TV comedy writers were Mel Brooks, Neil Simon, Woody Allen. The TV drama people included Gore Vidal, Paddy Chayevsky, John Frankenheimer, Arthur Penn. But those B-movie types knew how to do things fast, which increased profits. When TV moved to Hollywood, it went schlock. It forgot its roots in vaudeville."

Apparently, Norman Lear's restaurant is as successful as his TV shows. We waited 20 minutes for a table.

"I agree that TV isn't as funny as it used to be, but don't you think it's more sophisticated?"

"Not at all. In the old days, if a short guy walked in the door, you immediately had three minutes of short guy jokes. Today when a short guy walks on, you have three minutes of jokes about how difficult it is to relate to a short person in a mature manner. It's still the same short guy joke. You're couching it differently, but the level of maturity is no higher."

"What would you prefer?"

"I'd like to make *fun* of short guy jokes. Spoof the convention, rather than merely restate it in hipper jargon."

After we'd been standing around for a while, Bruce dug into his back pocket and came up with the straw he'd been biting and twisting when I first arrived. "Excuse me," he said. "This is my pacifier. I gave up smoking."

"When?"

"Eleven years ago . . . So I'm anal. It could be worse. I could be working for Monty Hall."

Wanting to be Woody Allen in a town full of Monty Halls is enough to make anyone a little edgy. But Bruce Vilanch had enough nervous energy to fill at least two obsessions. I took a stab at the second. "Is it difficult to be gay in Hollywood?"

PHOTOGRAPH BY DOROTHY TANOUS

"You've noticed. Unlike the theater and the publishing business, TV is an incredibly chauvinistic industry. Oh, everybody makes a big noise about how their attitudes have changed, but the minute the door is closed, it's all the tits-and-ass jokes you can think of.

"In TV, the female is a commercial selling device created by, and aimed at influencing, straight men. So how can women's rights, or gay rights, exist in this atmosphere? If a woman wants a job in television, she comes in, closes the door and begins taking off her clothes. It's a conditioned response. In New York, when a woman wants to cover a story or get a book contract, she doesn't ask the publisher, 'What would you like to do? Shove a banana up my ass? Fine, let's get started.' But that's still how an actress gets a part in television.

"And homosexuals, forget it. TV is the straightest business in the world. The only homosexuals are in costume and design, where they're chained up in the back room and tend to become screaming queens. There are practically no nice middle-class gays who still like an occasional girl, or sheep."

Bruce Vilanch was one of the few people I've met who can live comfortably in a state of cognitive dissonance. He despises television, continues to work in it toward his own personal ends, and feels absolutely no obligation to justify either himself or the medium. Had he been venal, his attitudes would have been easy to fix: a typical Hollywood hack whose ambition is to create a show, sell the pilot, then sit back and watch the checks roll in; in short, a writer whose ambition is not to write.

But Bruce Vilanch's ambition is to write *better* than anything currently being done on TV, even if he has to leave television to do it. Perhaps the most accurate description of Vilanch would be "intellectual degenerate," a charming cynic full of divine aspirations and devoid of childish illusions. When I asked about his reading habits, I was not surprised to learn that they cover the full range of contemporary fiction and nonfiction.

"Are many TV writers avid readers?"

"Let me put it this way. Earlier this morning, another writer on *The Brady Bunch* asked me if I'd heard of Norman Mailer. He said, 'His name is in this week's script. Who is he? Oh, wait a second . . . isn't he that character in *A Star Is Born*?' "

Recrossing Sunset—again on a red light—I asked Bruce if he thought there was any chance a group of young, talented, opportunistic writers might come along and wrest control of television away from the B-movie makers.

"Sure. But then they'd be in the same position as every other revolutionary

Continued on Page 84

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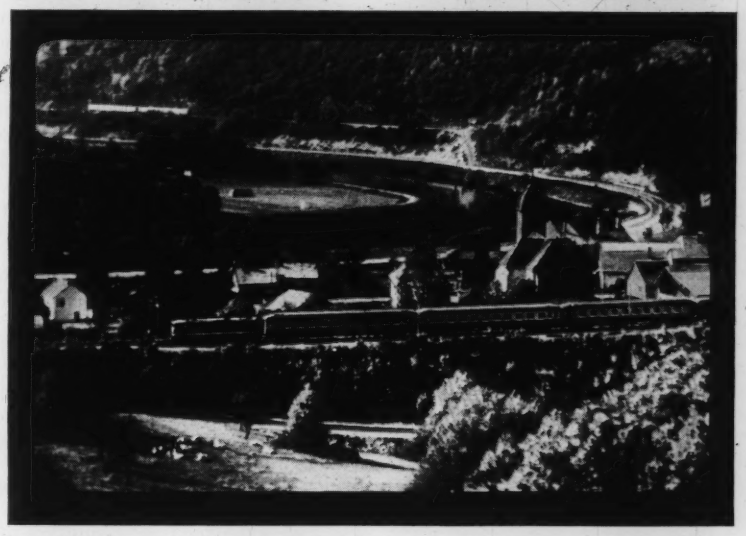

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The Hillcrest Gang

by David Steinberg

L.A.'s Hillcrest Country Club is a little like an inverted New York Athletic Club: there is no discrimination, but it sure helps if you're Jewish and a comedian

In 1969, I was hosting an "event" for ABC called *Music Scene*, a "hip, happening, now show" that combined comedy with contemporary rock music—a veritable surf-and-turf of entertainment. What it clearly lacked was Tabasco, so I begged the network to let Groucho Marx join me on the show, if not as co-host then at least as a guest.

At the time, thanks to the show, people were discovering my "Psychiatrist," a character I had developed at Second City in an attempt to capture the spirit of the Marx Brothers. Which means I stole it. Groucho was my hero and I could not share ABC's apprehension about his appeal to the "kids." The network, on the other hand, could never have imagined my nervousness about calling the great man himself.

ME: Hello Groucho, this is David Steinberg. . .You don't know me but. . .
GROUCHO: Of course I do. No one else might, but I do. Then again, you don't copy everyone else.
ME: Would you like to appear as my guest on *Music Scene*? We could do whatever you like, write it together, give you creative control . . ?
GROUCHO: How much?
ME: We could work that out to your satisfaction.
GROUCHO: Well, when you've worked it out to my satisfaction, then call me back.

(The Next Day)

ME: We spoke yesterday.
GROUCHO: That's nothing to brag about, but if you say so. . .
ME: . . . about doing my show.
GROUCHO: Sure, you were going to give me fifty thou for a walk-on. . .
ME: Would you do my show if I sing all the words to "Omaha, Nebraska?"
GROUCHO: Do you know who wrote that?
ME: You did. . .
GROUCHO: I'll do it, but I have no respect for your taste.

David Steinberg currently is directing his first film, Sex in America, *for Universal, as well as preparing a television series for Norman Lear called* Doctor, Doctor.

For the next four years, I spent as much time as I could with Groucho. There is always the danger of disillusion in hanging out with heroes, but my lunches with the mad Marx proved a movable feast. One day we were at the Brown Derby when a priest approached us. He was overwhelmed with excitement at having spotted Groucho.

"Oh, Mr. Marx," he gushed, "I just want to thank you for bringing so much joy into the world."

Groucho hardly looked up from his Cobb Salad. "And I," he replied, "want to thank you for taking so much out."

The Brown Derby was an exception. Most of our lunches were, at Groucho's invitation, at the Hillcrest Country Club. The Hillcrest is a little like an inverted New York Athletic Club: there is no discrimination, but it sure helps if you're Jewish and a comedian. It was, in fact, created by and for Jewish entertainers who were excluded from gentile country clubs. Tucked between Twentieth Century Fox and Century City, it gradually has acquired historical respectability, a rare phenomenon in a city where the great tradition is impermanence.

Over the years, Hillcrest has been a favorite haunt of a special breed of funny men—George Burns, George Jessel, Jack Benny, Danny Kaye, the Marx Brothers, the Ritz Brothers, Milton Berle—all of whom found in it the perfect institution to perpetuate and celebrate a lifelong mix of work and pleasure. The Hillcrest gang shared a similar background—New York, vaudeville, radio, television and motion pictures. All were children of immigrants and accordingly had an acute need to *belong* in America—a country which traditionally treated comedians like outsiders. The show business community in general, and Hillcrest in particular, became their street, their home.

One afternoon, I found myself at Hillcrest sitting across from Jack Benny, George Burns and Groucho. To me, their faces were a Mount Rushmore of comedy and their conversations a potpourri of James Joyce and Doc Simon—streaming out and very funny. "This kid can not only speak Hebrew," said Groucho as he introduced me, "but he knows all the words to 'Omaha, Nebraska.'"

It was a memorable meal. Each of my legendary luncheon companions had a minimum of two opinions on everything from borscht to Billy Graham, and the opinions exploded like firecrackers all afternoon.

The only thing the three of them ever agreed on was critics. They were, fumed Burns, "eunuchs at a gang-bang." ("It's easy to criticize Gracie and me for not being a strong enough act to follow Fink's Mules in vaudeville. But those mules were cute and talented.") Critics who had panned them were so deeply engraved in their memories that Burns and Benny could rattle off the name of a certain Radnitz of Hartford (who got them both on a Tuesday in 1933) as easily as they could recite what they had for breakfast. Easier, probably.

As my luncheon with Burns, Benny and Marx was ending, Groucho asked me if I would like to meet the legendary studio ancient, Adolph Zukor, then approaching his century mark. Jack Benny shook his head, an emphatic *no*. Ignoring my feeble protest, Marx marched me toward Zukor, who from behind looked like a cap perched on a chair. Groucho woke the startled mogul from his afternoon nap and, pushing me toward him, raised his voice: "Adolph, do you remember my brother, Chico?"

After I'd fled, Benny and I stood waiting for our cars. "It could have been worse," he said. "Chico owed everybody money. Zukor could have asked you to pay up."

The approach to Hillcrest is unsettling; with its parking lot packed with Mercedes, the place looks more like a Bund meeting than a Jewish country club. The sweeping horseshoe driveway cuts through gorgeous grounds and leads up to the clubhouse—a graceful colonial building that belies the atmosphere inside, which is more Stage Deli than Burning Tree.

Entering the club, a visitor is staggered by a tidal wave of talk; the men at the tables are dapper and a constant buzz of "time slots" and "first options" fills the air.

The decibel level drops only when a

Insiders: Clockwise, starting with Groucho Marx at bottom, are George Burns, Jack Benny, a waiter, Danny Kaye, George Jessel, Lou Holtz, the Ritz Brothers and Chico Marx. Harpo is putting the matzoh ball.

VIP enters the main dining room—although Hillcrest has its own standards of celebritydom. Business, after all, is business. "If Solzhenitsyn and Laverne and Shirley reach the maitre d' at the same time," explains one member, "Al waits."

On my next visit to Hillcrest, my entrance, sad to report, inspires no such moment of hushed tension. The reigning star of the day (paling my luster to that of a low-grade flashlight) seems to have carte blanche at each table. I can't believe it—this is the central presence in a room of giants and I—a savvy guy to say the least—have *never seen him before*. He strolls around (who is he?), gesturing with a coffee cup (*who?*), adored by each person he stops for. Mr. Sinai of Cedars/Sinai? The head of William Morris?

"More coffee?" asks a waiter, rushing up to fill the star's empty cup. "You're my main man, Rabbi Magnim," he confides.

But when my host for the afternoon appears, even the rabbi takes second billing: though George Burns has had lunch at Hillcrest every day for much of his life, the entire dining room invariably announces his entrances with noisy welcomes; it is hard to imagine that anyone present could be anything but a close, personal friend.

Burns gives me a big hug and takes me to another room where women are allowed. A leggy waitress soon appears in a minimal uniform; aglow in Burns' presence, she and he flirt familiarly. He points to me. "This young man here is lonely, highly sexed, and he confided in me that if you're ready, he is too."

"I know you're going to find this hard to believe," says the waitress, "but I got married over the weekend."

"Oh great!" cracks Burns. "Now you can fool around."

Burns turns the whole world, comedians included, into straight men. Groucho did the same. And if by chance you deviate from that role and get off a funny line, the Hillcrest gang will grade you like a schoolboy; their highest compliment is a dispassionate, "that's funny."

Although essentially a straight man himself for many years, among his contemporaries Burns has always been celebrated for his wit as a single. Whenever Burns and Jack Benny were in a car together, George would always do the driving; both feared that if Jack took the wheel, he might start laughing so hard at George's jokes that he would lose control and crash.

One night when Benny was booked in a Manhattan hotel, George, who was working in Los Angeles, called his friend at 3:00 in the morning New York time. When the telephone rang, Burns apologized for waking Benny but said he was having a heated dispute as to whether the Two Black Crows were billed as "Moran and Mack" or "Mack and Moran." Burns said he hated to disturb Benny at that hour, but that Jack was the only person he knew who could settle the argument. Benny roused himself, considered the problem, started to reply, and Burns hung up.

Burns still loves to reminisce about his days with the Two Black Crows or Fink's Mules. The Hillcrest comedians all treat their vaudeville apprenticeship with the reverence old grads bring to their alma maters.

With or without vaudeville, Jack Benny would have been a star. When I met him at Hillcrest, he didn't unleash devastating one-liners like Groucho or reel off the rich anecdotes that Burns told so well. Rather, it was Benny's presence that upped the ante on all conversation. He was the perfect audience, a marvelous listener who always brought out the funniest in his peers (if any). This was characteristic as well of his performing style. On radio, you could almost *hear* him listening—could imagine that long, slow, hilarious take even before he delivered another superbly timed punchline.

Had I met Milton Berle at Hillcrest I might have a slightly more elegant story to tell about him. At the time, however, I was doing a television show in Toronto, where Berle agreed to be my guest only if I painted my teeth black and wore a dress. Although he was jet-lagged after a long flight, he came off the plane talking, and except for cigars, food, cigars, laughs and cigars, he never stopped.

We went to his hotel suite where he proceeded to educate me in the Talmud of Comedy. Five hours later, as he walked me to the door—after having been so brilliantly articulate about timing, subtlety and taste—he pulled the "Do Not Disturb" sign from the doorknob and hung it on his schlong. As I was halfway down the hall he hollered, "David, is this funny?"

Definitely not Dorothy Parker or Alexander Woolcott, but definitely funny. You had to be there. ●

Comedy's Valley Forge

by Patrick Carr

Okay everybody, do the Catskills!

If you freeze out at the Improv, you might as well get a real job

We walk in and—oh, how nice! There's lots of cigarette-smoked wood here; it's Early American Cabin with lights by Tiffany of Tokyo. We'd hate to see it in the light of day, but then we don't have to; the comics come out at night.

The place is, however, renowned. Founded in the early sixties by one Budd Friedman and his wife, it began as a forum in which the cream of Broadway could mess around outside the confines of their evening jobs; it then metamorphosed into a showcase for young comic talent. It was—and still is—an insiders' after-hours joint, a safe home for the outrageous and spontaneous; at the Improv, encouraged by your peers and free from the threat of harassment by either patrons or police, you could riff as you pleased. The payoff was that the Improv opened doors; you might well end up on TV and/or with a recording contract.

This happened through the sixties and is happening still (though these days the Improv, having spawned imitators from coast to coast, is more of a link in the chain than the single source it used to be), and the list of graduates is intriguing: with Richard Pryor, Lily Tomlin, David Frye, Bette Midler, David Brenner, Gabe Kaplan, Freddie Prinze, Jimmy Walker, Elayne Boosler and Ed Bluestone represented, it would seem that this little joint produced healthy percentages of the hard-core sixties head chucklers and the seventies TV sit-com stars. Now, of course, it is trying for more of the same and looking out into a world increasingly eager for the return of the stand-up man, its specialty.

At the place itself, though, these stellar connections seem remote. Nervous, nice-looking Jewish boys and strange young men with wild eyes are pacing around the bar and there are maybe forty people in the crowd. We sit down, calculate the fine science of knee placement within available space, and watch the acts. First comes a skinny, nervous young black man saying that this is like Mississippi, man (may be right). He stiffs, and Barry Diamond, the Improv's MC of the night, bounces up. Looks around for the mike. Eyebrows shoot up. "Fuckin' guy stole the mike!" he yells. "Y'know?" They know.

"Welcome to Cafe Depresso," Barry says after he has retrieved his means of amplification. He looks half insecure, one-quarter hostile and one-quarter indefinably nuts. He tells a few half-hearted ones, then introduces Jack Graiman.

Graiman, wearing a cheap Hawaiian shirt like a New York cop on vacation, stands and glares at the audience for a full two minutes, then speaks in character. "I'm into cannibalism and I can tell you one thing," he says. "You fuckin' people are makin' me hungry, y'know what I mean?"

Between glares, he does routines—"My father had silicone shots in his head to enlarge his brain. It worked. Now he has to wear a bra to keep his eyes in"—but then the glare technique and this kind of joke begin to have their effect, and a drunk hippie and his even drunker girlfriend start to heckle. Graiman plays with them for a while, *Taxi Driver*-like, then lets them have it. "Why don't you rip your girlfriend's nose off, then suck on her head til it collapses?" he asks mildly. Hippie and girlfriend go slightly green and cease their heckling, the boy managing a disgusted groan.

Next is Larry David, comparatively sweet. Very sweet, in fact. He looks exactly like Woody Allen, does an inspired bit about a Chinaman trying to yodel in the Grand Canyon, and follows with an even funnier exposition of how the Samoans, who are not people but pancakes (calling them "flapjacks" makes them lose face), feel about things. He also says that God should have given breasts to men, not women, because men appreciate them so much more. That way, man could just stay at home and stare at his tits.

Barry Diamond comes back. "To hell with these faggots!" he says in a huge, beer-swilling baritone, "*Real* men fuck *wood*!" and introduces Joanie Peltz. Joanie, a cabaret singer, renders a very emotional song ("I've never been a woman before" is a key line) in a strong, supple voice, doing it well, then leaves with her Mom, Dad, Uncle and Auntie.

I click to and think that this is pretty entertaining. The audience is spotted with tourists, but mainly it's people who might be at a rock concert if only rock concerts weren't so boring and expensive.

But back to the action. Larry Ragland, another black, does whites (Jack Palance, Ed Sullivan) as blacks. It's old and he's young, but he works it well. Then Dianne Shallit from California (unauditioned but recommended by Improv founder Budd Friedman, now of the L.A. Improv) plays a poetic wallflower, mocking New York, and saying that she's writing a book about the sixties called *Sunflower, Nixon and My Fevered Thighs*. "Remember," she says by way of an exit line, "suicide is at best a temporary solution."

This last stuff is good but now Barry Diamond comes back—at 2 a.m., playing to a crowd of ten professionals and six customers—and, in the voice of a demented, slightly gay Puerto Rican, tells a story. It goes on for ten minutes and is hilariously delivered, and the bare bones of it are that when Barry was three days old, he was abandoned outside the door of the Improv in a shoe box. It was cold, and bums came by and pissed into the box (the Improv being on 44th Street just east of 9th Avenue, this level of bad treatment seems strangely mild). Then one day Mr. Friedman came out and noticed him, and after a while realized that maybe he was hungry. He went back

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES JOERN

Suck on your girlfriend's nose until it collapses! **I'm into cannibalism and you people make me hungry!**

into the club and got a roast beef sandwich, but of course Barry couldn't eat it. Eventually, Mr. Friedman realized this problem, went back into the club and put the sandwich into a blender. Then one day Mr. Friedman realized that since Barry was blue, he must also be cold. He saw two moving men carrying a couch into a store across the street, so he called out to them, bought the couch, and had them set it down over the shoe box. It nearly crushed little Barry—there he was with *roast beef* squirting out of his ears—but at least he was warm. And that's how Barry Diamond met Mr. Budd Friedman and got into show business.

Now we are in the bar with Chris Albrecht, who took over management and talent supervision when Budd went west. Chris, an ex-comic from Queens, is young and fast, competent, anxious and ambitious, on top of the game; he wears a tiny diamond in one ear and fully controls the managerial art of maintaining relevance in several simultaneous conversations. His revelations come in chunks like nuggets, conveyed pleasantly with only the barest hint of paranoia.

Yes, tonight he was nervous about Dianne from the Coast . . . maybe oh, 25 percent of the comics here are destined for greater things . . . these guys are *so* neurotic, y'know . . . on weekends it's all kids in the club, Friday night being "animal time" . . . I should hang out here after hours, *that's* when it's happening . . . He is distracted for a while by a quick bar-go-round begun when someone ventures that show business is "like sticking your dick in a Veg-O-Matic," but returns to note that "if you're still here when you're 26, you're too old." Chris is a mere 25.

And oh yes, the comics don't get paid. The place is a guaranteed showcase and great training ground (which is more than most young theatricals can expect). The piano player is reimbursed, however, as

The list of graduates is intriguing: Richie Pryor, Lily Tomlin, David Frye, Bette Midler, Freddie Prinze , Gabe Kaplan

is the MC. "How much?" I ask. "Not much, not much," says Chris, "about the same as Unemployment."

Been here three nights now. My knees ache, but my brain has been waltzing; some fun has been had. The feeling here is free, and this is the new wave, so while some of it is embarrassingly bad, other parts surpass even the cream of what's available on TV. There are various styles, of course—ranging from the benevolent whimsy of, say, Larry David (preferred by management) to the semi-psychotic lunacies of Jack Graiman—but over these nights some common elements have made themselves plain. There are themes, subject matter; everybody has said something about them, and they would seem, therefore, to reflect something of our times and tastes.

What are these themes? Well, they are Quaaludes (Barry's Jamaican dope dealers advertizing these popular items to the tune of "The Banana Boat Song"—y'know, "*Quaaaaaaaaaa-ludes! O-O-Quaa-O-Quaa. . . .*") and dope in general ("I stopped taking drugs," says Graiman. "I *am* drugs"); Italians and the Mafia ("Mutual of Sicily doesn't pay claims; it finds the guy who died and breaks his legs"); blenders, female orgasms, hookers, the neighborhood ("It's a great place to hang out if you're a fuckin' *bullet*"), being no good at sex, R2D2, diaphragms, illegal aliens ("Any Pakistanis here tonight? This is a raid"), enemas, mopeds ("A funny thing happened to me on the way over here tonight," says Graiman. "I got hit in the dick by a moped"), oral sex ("Cunnilingus is an Irish airline"), the club itself ("Anne Frank lived here"), Peter Frampton, female deodorants, Led Zeppelin, and parents. The world of politics is not represented here, all manner of prejudice is celebrated to the full, and there is a great deal of sex.

The comics are a slightly scruffy lot, not handsome but ever alert, and every one a misfit somewhere. Here, though, they have each other and the staff, and sometimes an old hand or recent star walks in with sunny breezes of fame and money. Otherwise it's trade talk, paranoia, competition and company, overlaid with the private thoughts of performers about to go on.

There are no female groupies here though—there are women in the audience. But this isn't rock & roll and they don't come back to meet the boys—so the comics roam the place, radar twitching, and often in the early hours they become morose. On such nights there are occasional flurries of nostalgia for the good nights—a club party or some spectacular visitation—and Chris and the staff do their best to encourage, but the comics' insecurity buzzes like radio static and grumpily they assume the airs of lonely ships on dark waters.

But wit is a great balm and comics don't *really* kill themselves, now do they? Relax; the trouble comes later when you don't *have* a place like this. In here, somebody says something outrageously true (that's the trick) and you just crack up. Can happen any old time. But then sometimes it doesn't —everyone's flat—and the whole damn place seems to howl with longing for Mom.

Outside the door, out in the cold on the blasted street, three more comics are wandering back and forth, no doubt thinking. ●

COMEDY ROOTS

BY JOHN MORTHLAND

The Mayor Of Second City

"Laughter is a response to a gestalt formation where two previously incompatible or dissimilar ideas suddenly form into a new piece of understanding—the energy released during that reaction comes out in laughter," says Del Close, director of Chicago's Second City. "The kind of laughter I'm after onstage isn't the kind of cruel laughter where you laugh *at* somebody, but sort of the laughter of shared experience."

Close has been with Second City, either as an actor or director, since the company's inception in 1959. Inspired theatrically by early theater of the absurd and comedically by each other—mostly University of Chicago intellectuals with snob appeal—Second City pioneered the fast, smart, topical improvisational theater that rose to prominence in the sixties. It also spawned four Not Ready for Prime Time Players: Dan Aykroyd, Gilda Radner, John Belushi and Bill Murray. Close sees *Saturday Night Live*'s antecedents as about equal parts Second City and *National Lampoon*, with a little rock music mixed in as well. Second City's influence is most prevalent in "the people-oriented scenes . . . we like to take a certain amount of care with acting, with the emotional states of our characters."

Though there was never a group political stance, Second City did political and social satire right from the beginning. For example, Close recalls three different skits circa 1962: one on American advisers in Vietnam; one featuring the rightist Roger Bowen, called "Conscience of a Conservative"; and another called "Peep Show for Conventioneers, or, Where's the Action?" that was "very much of an early head trip, a great scenario play with various types of dreams piled on dreams."

"Our favorite kind of laugh was what we used to call the mystery laugh," he recalls. "That's when you say some perfectly straight line onstage and the audience just cracks up. Then you realize, 'Ah, that was funny.' We find the best laughs by accident in most cases."

Close finds "a little irony in the fact that a lot of my students are in the big time, but I must say that's an evil I can certainly live with." He stays in Chicago simply because he prefers it to either coast, and Second City now has three companies there and two in Toronto. This fall, *Second City Television*, a syndicated series parodying TV programming, began showing in 55 local markets.

***Saturday Night*'s Godfather: Close**

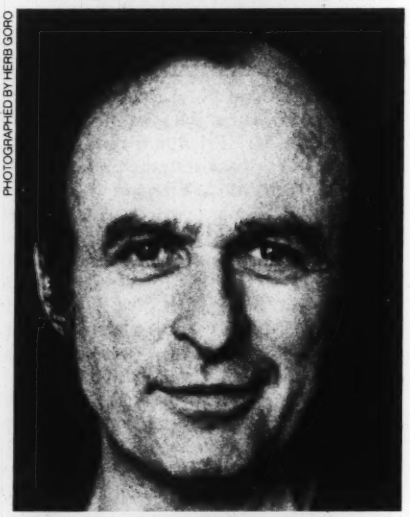
Did You Hear The One About the Aluminum-siding Salesman?

In the late forties, the hopeful young comics in New York all hung out at Hanson's, a cheap luncheonette on Broadway at the bottom of a building where agents kept offices. From Buddy Hackett to Rodney Dangerfield to Lenny Bruce, they'd be in there every day, grousing about the business and trying new bits on each other. Joe Ancis, the original sick comic, was the one who cracked everybody up every time.

Joe was the Compleat Jewish Neurotic, and he'd pour out his wildest fantasies daily in a didactic, rat-a-tat-tat stream of consciousness shpritz that ran together big American intellectual words, old-country Yiddish, hipster and jazz slang, obscene gestures and lots of body English. Some claim that Lenny Bruce learned everything he knew from Ancis (a gross oversimplification, no doubt), and those in the know dubbed Joe *The Funniest Man in the World*.

But Ancis, who lived with his parents in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, until he married at age 35, was terrified of audiences. He performed publicly only once, when he was still in his teens; the experience confirmed his worst fears, and he went straight into the aluminum-siding business, where he's been ever since. His true passions, he says, have always been ballet, opera and museums. He doesn't follow comedians—says he never really did, just knew a lot of them—but every now and then he'll catch one in a club with his friend Dangerfield. Two he likes are Richard Pryor ("an original mind") and Ed Bluestone. Ancis saw *Saturday Night Live* once and thought it "inventive, but spotty and uneven."

PHOTOGRAPHED BY HERB GORO



Lenny Bruce's Godfather: Ancis

"I wouldn't really be qualified to make a pronouncement, but I think today comedy is more of an honest expression than the old 'take my wife' jokes," he says. "It's more into contemporary observations about society. The few young people I've seen aren't playing characters; they're more themselves, and there's an intelligence that comes through above and beyond the comedic aspects. But that doesn't necessarily mean they're better or worse than comedians from the old days, only different. Life goes on, comedy goes on. There'll always be somebody fresh and unique, a contributor in every new generation."

Now 51, Ancis lives on Manhattan's East Side with his wife and two kids. He makes "a great deal of money" selling siding—some even say he's *The Best Salesman in the World*. ●

John Morthland is a New York freelance whose specialty has been rock.

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Zora Says, "Cheese"

by Trucia Kushner

"Honey, in high school I was not cute . . . .I was a real cootie"

She looks like a Vargas pinup girl posing on a stage, but she sounds like a conversation overheard at Bellevue. She opens her mouth and a verbal cuckoo pops out: "Cheese alert. . . cheese alert." The cabaret audience—couples from Trenton, a smattering of neo-preppies from Christopher Street—eyes Zora Rasmussen warily.

What the fuck is this bizarre blonde talking about? "God, oh God, oh God, oh God," she chants with a Bette Davis rhythm, in much the same spirit that Jack Benny crossed his arms.

Then, patiently, she explains that "cheese" is something which typifies bland American culture, like teased hair in shopping malls, double-knit, Buddy Hackett, Tupperware or the song "Feelings." The word is defined as "lower than bad taste" and derives from the mid-fifties term "cheesey": *adj.* -ier, -iest. *Slang.* Used to describe things such as gold-flecked Formica.

According to Zora, "cheese" is on its way in as a humor trend of the seventies, although she and her friends have been calling things "cheese bombs" for years. "Cheese" is Marty Mull doing a riff on polyester, Lily Tomlin portraying her TV-commercial housewife and Steve Martin impersonating a Vegas MC. Zora's favorite piece of cheese, on stage, is to reveal her former self, neé Kathy Zora Rasmussen, a mousy untouchable who went to high school in Detroit in the sixties. She speaks with the pained authority of someone who has been to ugly and back:

"Honey, in high school, I was not cute. Ya know whaddimean? It was like I had a disease or something. People used to cross their fingers when I passed in the hall. I was a real cootie."

Zora whips out a life-size yearbook picture. Suddenly, the crowd is looking at a real "cheese bomb." Kathy Rasmussen is the kind of constipated-looking Catholic girl who makes her own clothes and pursues a career in nursing. She wears glasses that do for her eyes what zero gravity did for Spock's ears.

Zora screams in mock rage: "I wanna know just one thing. Who invented these glasses?" Today, she no longer looks like the back of a Plymouth. She's a sensual blonde with the eyes of Karen Black, the mouth of Martha Raye, the vulnerability of Marilyn Monroe, the wiseacre attitude of Jean Harlow and the accent of a Detroit truck jockey. Comparisons are odious but inescapable for an "unknown."

Zora has always wanted to be a performer. But so do hundreds of others who flock to New York and plug into the try-out circuit, hoping they'll press someone's buttons. If Zora succeeds, it will be because she has incredible raw talent and the manic energy to drive it. However, she still faces some practical decisions about her career before she hits the winning combination, the Area Code to the big time. (The number is not listed.)

Meanwhile, Zora's life is the classic sit-com existence of the struggling performer. She has no money, found a rat in her apartment, was robbed and then aced out of a new apartment after she'd given up the old one. "When I tell people I'm in show biz, they always say, 'How come you're not a star yet?' It's so irritating. I mean nobody starts at the top, goes from the mail room directly to president. I may not have money, but I think I lead a pretty chic life."

In order to survive, Zora has driven a cab, sold ice cream, been a singing waitress and a census enumerator (she calls it a census fabricator because she used to make up whole families, numbers of toilets, etc.). When people recognize her, it's not high-tone folks in front of Bendel's, but welfare types on the subway who saw her singing in Central Park or at the Gay Day parade. The transition from cab to cabaret has not been easy.

One day she and her husband, Robert, also a performer, answered an ad in the trades, "Ambitious couple wanted to work with internationally-known performer. Use of your own Cadillac." They found they were auditioning to play the Mom and Dad of Zippy, a chimpanzee with a resume that outdid theirs with gigs like Ed Sullivan, Arthur Godfrey and Captain Kangaroo. After going through their paces, they were solemnly informed by Zippy's trainer that Robert was not tall enough, and Zippy just didn't respect men unless they towered over him.

Stories like this invariably find their way into Zora's act inbetween revealing and romantic Joni Mitchell-type songs she writes herself. Admittedly, it's a bizarre combination. "See, I don't wanna give up comedy, but I wanna sing too. What's hard is to integrate the music and comedy and make it work so you don't sound like a cheeseball. I used to go to all these auditions and it was like trying to fit into someone else's giant jigsaw puzzle. I decided to showcase myself."

This led Zora to produce "High Heeled Women," a comedy review featuring five women comics (fem-coms? humorettes?) doing stand-up plus group numbers like "Date Night in Hawaii," in which Zora plays Debbie Duzzit. The show plays weekly in the Valentine Room of an off-the-beaten-track restaurant-cum-cabaret, Once Upon a Stove.

Zora is not anxious to associate herself or the show with a political consciousness. "People will think we're all dykes who want to destroy men and the family unit and start a revolution for equal bathrooms." It figures that a woman who knows in her soul that contact lenses and hair dye changed her life is going to prefer facing a room full of Shriners to the stony-faced editors of *Ms.*

But Kathy Rasmussen still lurks somewhere in the innards of the zany Zora. When she's telling a story, if you watch carefully, you can see the censorship of a Catholic saint flash across her face like a strobe. Her transition from cootie to cover girl has been thought out and analyzed. She admires Barbra Streisand because she "always reinstates her goals. In other words, she's not the type who just jerks around and snorts coke till she has to have her nose relined."

Zora is excited about an upcoming gig at Tramps, a potentially hot-shit club where for the first time she'll have backup singers and her own band. But her anticipation of the club date pales in comparison to the prospect that all those people from high school back in Detroit might one day pick up an issue of *New Times* and shout, "Oh my God, it's the cootie. Can you believe it. God, look at her, she's really cool!"●

Trucia Kushner covered City Hall for Women's Wear Daily

PHOTOGRAPH BY LANE BERKWIT

Comedy Is the New Rock

Somewhere along the line comedy stole rock's thunder...

by Tracy Young

"Well," my friend said, looking more and more frustrated, "if your family never talked . . . and they never touched . . . how *did* they communicate?"

"We told jokes."

The children of the middle class had soft white hands and ants in their pants; we were as cut off from the world as we were from our families. Pop music echoed the shrill cries of our junior high hormones, but we bopped down the corridors in timid packs, and whatever the music stirred up was quickly dissipated by goofing-off in study hall: "Who walks in the classroom, cool and slow, who calls the English teacher 'Daddi-o' . . . Charlie Brown . . ."

The music itself was funny on purpose, but the black musicians who played it possessed, we believed, a kind of cool experience kept secret from us. Aping that cool, taking our cues from their songs, we were funny by accident: AM agitprop. Sometimes the institution thrust the foolishness on us: high school was the first time we noticed that authority met fallibility like crossed eyes. And then, running into that, we *had* to be funny; without a lavatory pass, we had no other escape.

In the late sixties our voices changed. The stakes had gotten higher: sex was permitted, death a possibility. And our class clown was Abbie Hoffman, shaking his fist at the system. But our soundtrack remained pop music.

The most riveting rock was a rebop of black music (Little Richard reincarnated as Mick Jagger), the most original rock (that of the Beatles, who were cuddly, smart and upwardly mobile) became accessible and downright academic. And we'd thought we were dropping out of school. Youth had the energy of an ethnic group, but one whose power, ironically, was economic.

Bob Dylan, who was the wiliest of our lot, tried to outrun the consumer beast we had become, hiding behind his enigmatic humor. But the whiff of danger, the promise of real experience, could only be sustained, Dylan found, by taking large quantities of drugs with his music. We bought Dylan's riff: Drugs, we thought, could change us, reveal the secrets of black cool; drugs could make us feel it all and more. It was real serious business that ended up being funny—as anyone who ever tried to make love on acid can attest: "Wait . . . put it where? . . . it's moving." And rock and comedy, the two moving forces in our lives, began to pass each other at ninety miles an hour.

In 1970, I flew to London to visit a friend, and we celebrated my arrival by dropping acid and staying up all night listening to the Stones. At about three in the morning, gazing up at the stars and contemplating the mechanics of the universe, I suddenly realized what the song "Jumpin' Jack Flash" *really* meant: "It's a gas," the Stones kept screaming.

I leapt to my feet and called out to my friend, who'd been in the bathroom, staring at herself in the mirror and wondering why blood poured out of her mouth when she brushed her teeth (red tooth paste).

"I've got it!" I cried. "Listen: It's a gas . . . Like, I'm a gas . . . and you're a gas . . . we come from gas, you know *atoms* . . . and we're gonna return to gas . . . and . . . It's a *gas*!" Talk about cosmic farts.

We stood there, stunned to tears by the profundity; then we burst out laughing.

So it wasn't any mistake that marijuana didn't go out of style like the rest of the sixties, that the only scenes from *Easy Rider* that don't now make us cringe are those with Nicholson getting stoned. Drugs made the world manageable—the cage, whether it was high school or the universe, had a trap door; and IT was not the space baby from *2001*, it was your own distorted face in the mirror, alternately horrifying and hysterical.

Once the realms of extremity became available to all of us, white middle-class America decided that since it didn't have Soul, it had better glom onto a sense of humor.

Meanwhile, back at the studio, rock was becoming as unattractive and useless as any animal going through its garish last gasps. The rock stars who lived dangerously OD'd on their experience, and the spectacle that accompanied their successive ends became a message almost too frightening to bear. It was one thing for Janis Joplin to sing about it—we could even applaud her agony—but when she died (and Morrison and Buckley and Hendrix and Jones), we shrank back. After Joplin there was a deafening silence. Women in rock—Linda Ronstadt, Joni Mitchell, the desmoiselles of Fleetwood Mac—did little wailing, preferring instead to kvetch about relationships that would be analyzed to death in record reviews and profiles of the Star as a Real Person. Mental health had made

the charts; Freud and Karen Horney were the new Gamble & Huff.

By the time Bette Midler waddled onstage, shaking her nénés and playing to the Boys in the Band, the sexuality of rock had been inverted, a joke Elvis underlined by dressing in Liberace drag and pushing a self-caricatured Vegas act. Jagger leapt in, took to performing in a dress and eye make-up; Elton John clowned with bisexuality; David Bowie presaged punk by going beyond sex. And punk itself, with tooth of steel and heart of tin, made a mockery of the old rock, whose syntax it stole and whose spirit it ground to shards.

Disco—stylized and programmed to a fever pitch—became the most compelling music. Manufactured dollies like Donna Summer, whose voice fell through the music like a buzz bomb, were recycling old rock formulae, giving them a wired and utterly synthetic SNAP! It was music to dance to, looking in a mirror. It said: get behind technology; narcissism is smart. It was the logical extension of Bob Dylan plugging in his electric guitar at Forest Hills a decade ago ("How does it *feeel* . . . To be on your own?"). And the people who booed then understood their instincts: technology had begun to grow bigger than the artist. The entertainment marketeers couldn't help but pick up on the scent, even if it was a cold meal.

"Sometimes I worry about being a success in a mediocre world."

—Lily Tomlin

Somewhere along the line comedy stole rock's thunder. Comedy became—if you take cultural portents at all seriously—the new rock. In March 1977, the most galvanizing ticket event was not some rock & roll extravaganza at the Felt Forum: Lily Tomlin's Broadway debut, *Appearing Nitely*, held a few blocks and a certain psychic distance away, uptown at the Biltmore Theatre, was a brilliant pastiche of "docu-comedy." It had the bite of *Blonde on Blonde*.

Tomlin had already been acknowledged as a comic genius. Her television appearances—beginning with *Laugh-In*, followed by four specials of her own and guest shots on everything from *Dinah!* to *Saturday Night*—had expanded her audience way beyond the grass-roots following she'd picked up playing little clubs and colleges across the country. Her arrival was heralded by the kind of advance press that had last been deemed appropriate for Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue; and her face on the cover of both *Rolling Stone* and *Time* would augur the significant cultural endorsement of Richard Pryor, Diane Keaton and Steve Martin.

Tarted up in rock clothes (she wore a glittery white tux for her finale), Tomlin attracted fanatic SRO crowds who'd come to recognize themselves and ended up having their liberal pretensions assaulted; she was as lethal in her comedy as Dylan had been in his songs. *Appearing Nitely* was extended four times before moving on to Philly and Washington, D.C. Finally Clive Davis, the man who'd once signed Dylan, would instruct Arista Records to produce an album version of the show.

More and more, comedy was being designed to upstage rock. The hottest thing on television became *Saturday Night*, a program shrewdly packaged for the restless rock-crowd. Masterminded by a young whiz producer, written and performed by a troupe of young comics who'd been incubated at Second City and the *National Lampoon*, *Saturday Night* by definition was hip: like rock, it assumed the audience was stoned. It was hardhitting, and a lot more fun to watch than a bunch of longhaired geeks with electric guitars feigning feeling. In no time at all, the show's electronic seamlessness and glib offense made dying vaudevillian formats like *Don Kirshner's Rock Concert* look as puffy and feeble as *Lawrence Welk*: when pop stars appeared on *Saturday Night*, they were there as filler, warm-up acts for the comedy.

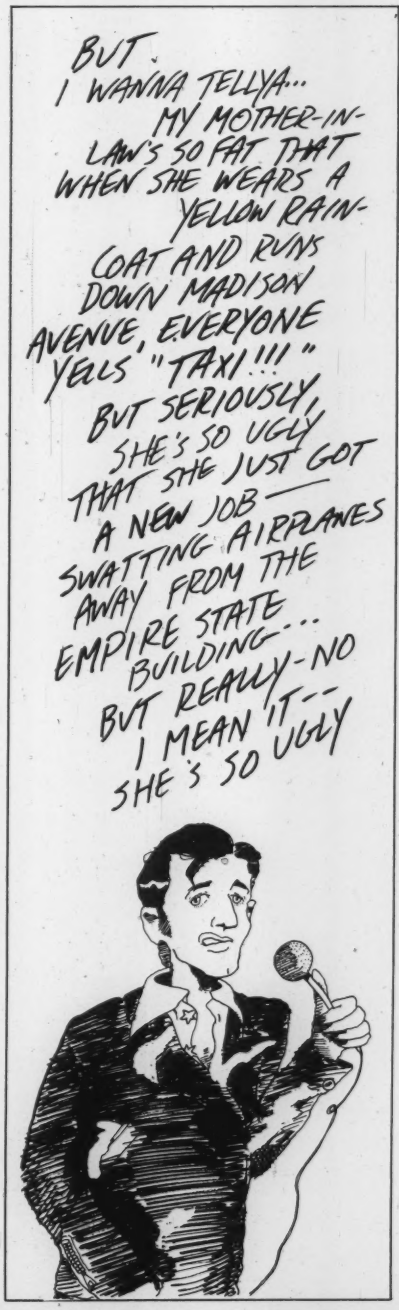


ILLUSTRATION BY PETER KAPLAN

Gilda Radner, a *SN* regular who became famous doing Baba Wawa, once said that her favorite routine was "Video Vixens," a parody of punk rock; because, like any other good-time teenybopper from Detroit who'd nevertheless been a nerd in high school, she'd always had fantasies of being a rock star: rock stars had always been sexier. But people like Richard Pryor and John Belushi began to acquire reputations as larger-than-life genius madmen, changing the image of comic to something dashing . . . and dangerous. The entire *Saturday Night* crowd, in fact, took on the kind of awesome glamour rock groups used to have, a switch that even rock stars would respect: at an end-of-season bash at Elaine's, sitting at a big center table, sucking on a Heineken's and looking for all the world like a fan, was Mick Jagger.

The comedy audience grew larger by the day. When Steve Martin held an autograph party to plug his album, the crowds stood like stooges for hours under the harsh glare of Korvette's florescent lights. But it was not always enough to stand and wait. We knew these strange new comedians were not simply talking about our lives in common, they were OUT THERE. They seemed closer than us to the dark heart of it all. And we wanted a piece. When *Saturday Night* held an "Anyone Can Host" contest, it received 150,000 post card bids. One finalist was the governor of South Dakota; and no lesser figure than Julia Phillips, one of the most powerful producers in Hollywood and fresh from the triumphant opening of her $22 million film, *Close Encounters*, would confess her secret desire to host the show.

Comedy began to work off the same energy of busted chains—the triumph of anger over repression—that once drove rock. But comedy was utilitarian where rock had become sheer display. Yet, because our consumer culture is so terminal, comedy is already moving along a parallel track.

Traditional female stand-up comics (Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers, et al.) were criticized, as Joplin was, for mining a vein of self-degradation, and then were ignored by bigger audiences, who pre-

ferred to recognize themselves in the feisty working girls of sit-coms like *Mary Tyler Moore* and *Rhoda*, TV's easy-listening shows. Black comics, with the notable exception of Richard Pryor, began kissing the TV audience's hem. The humor that culminated in the messianic martyrdom of Lenny Bruce (he used to rough us up to make us think differently) was supplanted by the shock tactics of the *National Lampoon*, whose bad taste was merely an insult to our intelligence. It wasn't enough to make us laugh; they had to make us feel—preferably something bad—because we were terrified of being corny. And *Saturday Night*, the *Lampoon* on TV, began blowing it too.

Saturday Night was considered avant-garde because there were moments when its marketed insanity (like that of *Mary Hartman* . . .) made sense: Gilda freaking out at a slumber party; Jane Curtin, trying to fill Chevy Chase's slot on "Weekend Update," flipping out and flashing her tits. But too often the show would take a smart idea, such as using a "stunt baby" in a parody of family drama, only to bring it to its most grotesque end: Buck Henry strangling the baby and throwing it through a plate-glass window.

Perhaps *SN* kept having to reach because it had no real enemies: when the Smothers Brothers did political satire it was gratifying because President Johnson was a satisfying target and dissent was both theater and reality; when *SN* does Carter and Ford, the pay-off isn't as great. By the same token, when Michael O'Donoghue gathers the cast together as the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and instructs them to gouge out their eyes with sharp needles . . . and they do . . . *Saturday Night*'s contempt for the medium is overwhelmed by its contempt for the audience: "Only assholes watch TV, give 'em what they deserve."

When death becomes the period at the end of a comic sentence, the trapdoor is shut with a bang, and erstwhile fans start going out on Saturday night instead.

The objective correlative of the entire rock-to-comedy-to-commerce succession came six days after Buck Henry threw the baby out with the bathwater on *Saturday Night*. *Rolling Stone* magazine, in a two-hour special, presented Donny Osmond as editor Jann Wenner. Rock: the new comedy.

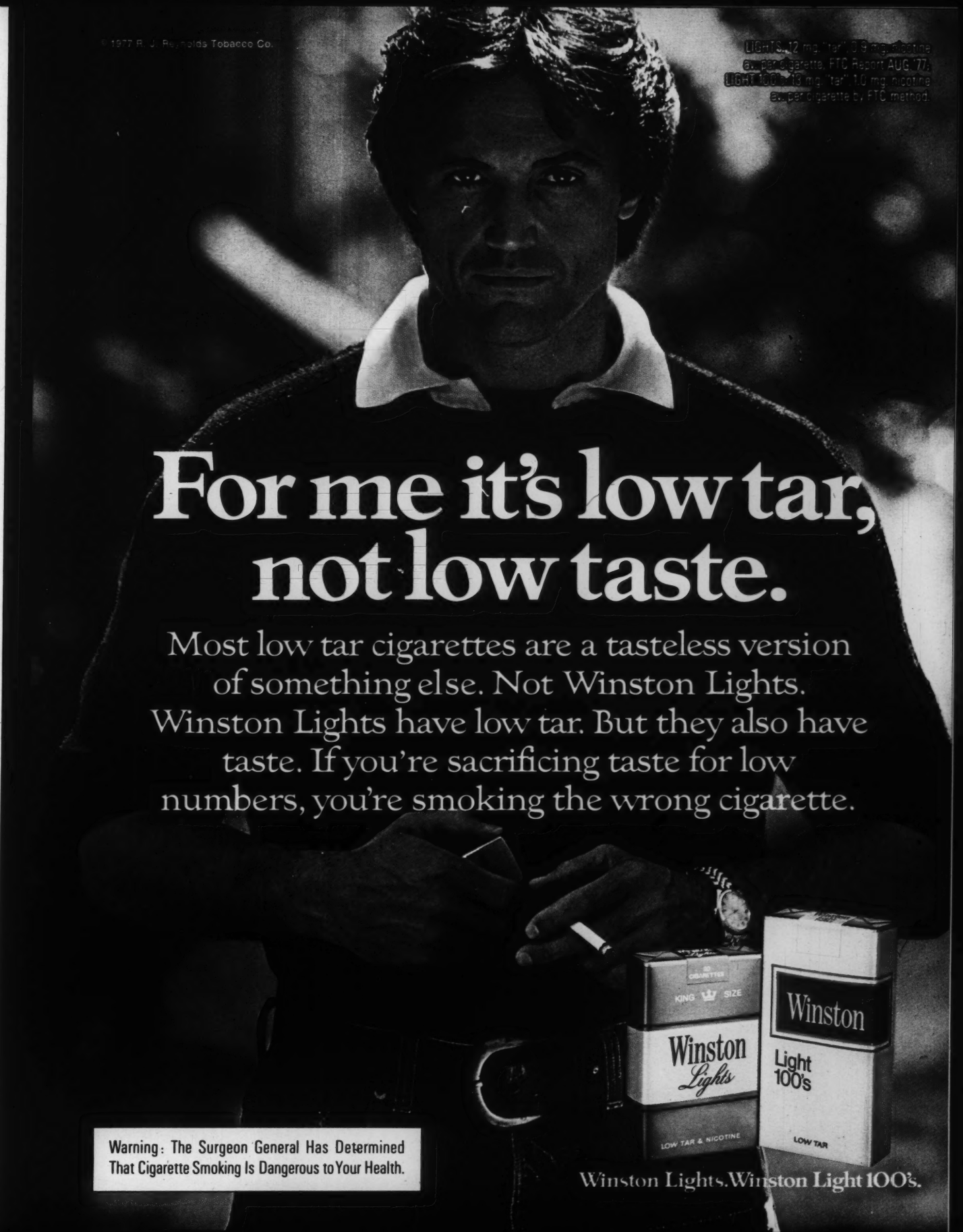
If further comment were necessary, it was offered up halfway through by Bette Midler herself: "*Rolling Stone*'s 10th anniversary . . . how boring . . . These are the people who made rock respectable . . . It's the American Way, not unlike Velveeta cheese."

The homogenization and pasteurization of comedy is, of course, far from complete. There's plenty of ripening brie around—it's just a matter of finding it. One promising unknown is a singer-comedienne named Zora Rasmussen (see page 45); another is a 22-year-old former computer analyst from Liverpool whose name—Elvis Costello—is a fortuitous hybrid of comedy and rock, and whose lyrics suggest a malleable new anthem: "Oh, I used to be disgusted/Now I try to be amused/But since their wings have gotten rusted/You know the angels wanna wear my red shoes."

Costello, with his slicked-back hair, shades and pegged jeans, looks like a wired Buddy Holly and has a healthy loathing for everything that went wrong with rock. He hates the record biz ("they're irrelevant") and can't understand mass-marketed teen dreams ("Springsteen's always romanticizing the street . . . I live near Hounslow. It's a very boring area. It's a terrible place"). More important, Costello delivers short, quick-hit songs that come straight from the pituitary. He plays as if the sock hop were being held on the freeway, and his songs about sex, like Zora's comic riffs, grab you by the throat: "Both of us were willing/But we didn't know how to DO IT."

So even if they're ours for only a moment, it will have been long enough for them to slam us up against the wall of a really good joke. Gestalt, I mean, gesundheit. ●

Elvis Costello prepares for superstardom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MARTIN MULL IS ALMOST FAMOUS

Fernwood's Barth Gimble has always enjoyed the sound of two hands clapping—his own. Now America is coming around to his point of view

by Paul Slansky

Martin Mull's manager has forgotten to make a reservation, so we stand in the entrance of the Universal commissary waiting for an empty table while stars like Lily Tomlin and Sly Stallone march past us to immediate seating. "I guess I'll have to do some speed eating," he says. "Just run my fingers over the food." Ten minutes into our wait, a departing couple approaches us and hands Mull their lunch checks and a $10 bill. He politely explains that he is *not* the cashier. "When I met Martin Mull he was accepting cash and checks at the Universal commissary," he sa s wryly. "There's your opening line."

Through six years as a singer of loony tunes that found inspiration in the mundane ("Dancing in the Nude," "Margie the Midget," "Noses Run in My Family") and earned him a diminutive but devoted following, Martin Mull maintained a mighty sense of self. If no one showed up at his gigs, it was their loss, not his. Out of a combination of defensiveness and egomania, he created a stage persona that exuded a smug arrogance totally out of proportion to the degree of success he had achieved—a character superficially similar to, but significantly smarter than, the one Steve Martin is currently overexposing. So when he was offered a part in *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*, a show that exalted the banal, he certainly wasn't about to let his total lack of acting experience stand in the way.

In the role of wife-beating PR man Garth Gimble, Mull developed one of the most odious characters since Cagney smashed a grapefruit in Mae Clarke's face in *Public Enemy*. The damage Garth inflicted on his wife, Patty, was psychically as well as physically brutal: for Christmas he gave her a mop and pail—early, so she'd have plenty of time to use them. When a shirt button came off, Garth insisted that Patty fix it before she left for work. While she was sewing, he strolled out of the bedroom fully dressed. "You wore another shirt!" she said, to which he ad-libbed condescendingly, "A topless executive, Patty? I think that's *years* away." When Garth was impaled on an aluminum Christmas tree, he was mourned by no one but Mull fans.

Six months later Mull was back, hosting Norman Lear's talk-show parody, *Fernwood 2-Night*, as twin brother Barth Gimble, a small-time hustler who had fled Miami on a morals charge, then pointed out that he had "a pretty darn good case of entrapment." Barth Gimble was the perfect comic symbol for the seventies, a con man who revealed his ignorance even as he thought he was being incredibly hip. Here he is coming on to a nubile youngster who has been the spankee in a demonstration of corporal punishment:

B: You have quite a talent there, Debbie. You know, we have "Rocket to Stardom" here on the show. Would you wanna be on that?

D: Well, the only thing I know how to do is sing our school song.

B: Sing! Perfect, you can come back and sing your school song, I love it.

D: It's in Latin.

B: OK, Latin music. You guys know Latin music, huh? (The band goes into a samba.) That's the stuff.

In the space of one year, Martin Mull brought to life two personalities who could be put into any situation and react true to character.

Martin Mull is almost famous. In the last few months he has done Merv, Dinah, Tom Snyder, the Rock Awards, *Wonder Woman* and *Hollywood Squares*. He is currently playing a disc jockey who gets laid on the air in his first film, *FM*. (An appearance in *Oh, God!*, in which he briefly stepped in for John Denver—whom he has called "the Poland of music"—was cut from the final print.)

He is also finishing up work on his new album, *I Haven't the Vegas Idea*, and a best-of collection, *No Hits, Four Errors*, has just been released. Next month he begins taping 13 more weeks of *Fernwood 2-Night* for an early-April air date. *Time* said he has the best sense of timing "since Jack Benny passed age 39." *Playboy* wants him for the interview. So when, as he wolfed down his shrimp cocktail and beer before rushing back to the *FM* set, I told him that a random sample of 20 Californians turned up only five who knew who he was—plus one who thought he was "that guy who says 'Excuse me,' with the arrow in his head"—Martin Mull laughed. "That's terrific," he said. "When I walked into the house last night, *everyone* knew me."

"Martin always had the demeanor of a

ILLUSTRATION BY KRISTEN JOHNSON

star," says his manager, Larry Bresner. "He'd go out and buy $200 shoes when he couldn't pay the rent.

"We don't take on a lot of performers," he continues. "You can only handle so much, and you're really not interested in handling somebody who can't go to the full limit of their potential, because it's no fun. You book them into 50 dates a year and it's boring time. With Marty there's no such thing as boring. I've never met anybody that's got a brain that's full of more ideas. The man could be the number-one advertising executive in the country." (When Earth Shoes recently asked him to do an ad for them, Mull came up with "Shoes: Fetish or Necessity?")

"Martin is one of a kind," says Al Burton, one of Norman Lear's creative supervisors who caught Mull's show at the Roxy in Los Angeles and signed him for *Mary Hartman*. "He has this unique hateful quality while still being an appealing performer.

"Martin was a joy to work with," he adds. "He is one of the quickest-thinking wits since the old days of wits. The nuances that he got out of those lines were incredible. I know very few actors who can make a written word sound as if it's ad-libbed. I like Steve Martin, but I don't think I would have gone after him the way I went after Martin Mull."

In fact, Martin and Mull are good friends and have worked together on several projects. "There was a time when Martin and Steve seemed to osmose off of each other a little," says comedy writer Harry Shearer, whose credits include *Fernwood 2-Night*. "I think Steve picked up a little of Martin's arrogance, and I don't know what Martin picked up from Steve—three or four good lines probably. With Steve it's so obvious that he's putting it on, but with Martin it's a lot closer to home. You can never quite be sure whether he's doing a character or whether that's the guy, which is interesting."

Eugenie Ross-Leming, co-producer of *Forever Fernwood*, is another Mull fan. "The Garth character was so grim that it was really hard on Martin," she says. "The real tribute was that he carried it off." How he did it, though, she's not sure. "I don't know, maybe Martin's past is incredibly sordid and warped—we can hope."

"Martin always had the demeanor of a star," says his manager. "He'd go out and buy $200 shoes when he couldn't pay the rent"

Martin Mull was born in Chicago in 1943 and grew up in Ohio towns not unlike Fernwood. "Until the age of 16, I was the same as Taft," he says. In 1959 the family moved to Connecticut, where Martin was the star place-kicker for the New Canaan High football team. He went on to become an honor student at the Rhode Island School of Design and receive a Masters degree in painting in 1967. That same year, he made his acting debut before the Providence draft board.

Slicking his hair back with Vaseline and sporting a lumberjack shirt several sizes too small, Mull prepared a lunch of carrots, celery and a tuna fish sandwich. Each carrot stick and celery strip was individually wrapped in aluminum foil, as was the lump of tuna fish and each slice of bread. He carried it in an oversized grocery bag with his name scribbled all over. He claimed membership in every Communist group he'd heard of. After his hearing test, he pretended to be locked in the booth. When the psychiatrist asked him what he thought of the draft, Mull, chewing on his hand all the while, said, "Well, actually, I think it's sort of chilly in here. Would you mind closing the window?" The Army brought on the hook.

By this time Mull's interests were divided between art and music. He joined a conceptual-art group whose most notorious project was *Flush with the Walls* (or *I'll Be Art in a Minute*), a 1971 exhibition in the men's room of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

"We wanted to have a show at the museum," he says. "But generally you had to be dead to be chosen. This was a price we didn't really want to pay. So at 8 p.m. sharp, six of us, women as well as men, went in there and put up our work with masking tape while there were still people in there using it. In a matter of minutes we had over 300 people in the men's room, including film crews for the 11 o'clock news. It was a terrific success."

The following year, *The Umbrellas of Pitchburg (mais oui serve vous)* was sponsored by the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art. The show consisted of hors d'oeuvres in the shapes of great works of 20th-century art, such as "Picasso on Rye," which were eaten by the guests. (One doggie bag remained for years in the Institute's freezer.)

Mull continued to produce his *Fantasia*-esque paintings, and was making some money—"I priced them very much like merchandise," he says. "It wouldn't be $500, it would be $499.99."—but his career as a musician began to take up more of his time. In his senior year at RISD, Mull had formed a group called Soup, a band remembered less for its musical abilities than for its demented stage show. Mull, in a chef's hat, was Captain Soup; the others' costumes ranged from pajamas to a giant cigarette carton. The group recorded one unmemorable album before disbanding.

After getting his degree, Mull moved to Boston, where he lived in a basement apartment while working at a small recording studio. He was writing songs and thinking seriously about performing. When he married artist Kristin Johnson in 1970 (they are currently getting a divorce), he quit his job, collected unemployment and hired a manager with a special talent for securing nonpaying bookings.

"We had no money," Kristin recalls. "Martin had to take public transportation to the gigs carrying his guitar, and not get paid, and play to an empty house. But he has a very large ego, and that sustained him for a long time."

His songs would take a single bizarre premise (What if I married a midget?) and extrapolate the logical results ("Walking hand and ankle/she's got her arm around my sock").* They were strange but basically sweet—when he poked fun at something, it was good-natured. But when he began performing, another character developed between

PHOTOGRAPH BY CAPRICORN RECORDS

And now for the famous hidden trick ...

*"Margie the Midget" Copyright © 1973 WB Music Corp. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

the songs, a character from which Barth Gimble is a direct descendant. "I first started making music during the folk music scare of the sixties," he says, "and I always felt that messages should be sent by Western Union, not by music. I would get in front of the audience and try to play these little alternative songs, and they'd look at me like I was half-baked. So I realized I'd have to introduce the tunes, and my tongue sort of went into my cheek, because that's who I am. And out of that, certain things got great laughs and cumulatively built into an act."

The laughs came at the audience's expense. If they couldn't appreciate a song like "Partly Marion" ("She was only 17/ when she cut them off in the washing machine/she just reached for the wringer/ and zap went the fingers/it was no consolation that they come off so clean"),* it was *their* fault.

"Initially it was defensive," he says. "I'd been told for years by my folks that I could not sing, and that's quite a lot, to go on stage doing something you've been told you cannot do."

He signed a contract with Capricorn Records and was soon on the road more than he was home. Then came Martin Mull and his Fabulous Furniture. "Standing up there in front of a stack of amps wasn't really satisfying," he says. "And when I'd sit around my living room and play with some friends, that did seem satisfying. I thought, 'Maybe the catalyst here is furniture,' so I figured, why not try it? It made me feel more at home, which would make the audience feel more at home. So I brought my home. It was literally my real furniture." When he couldn't schlep his own things, he rented old tables, chairs and lamps from local Salvation Armies.

The Mulls were then living in New York on Riverside Drive, and Martin's career began putting a strain on the marriage. "He demanded an audience no matter where he was," says Kristin. "Even if it was just me and him. It was, 'Listen to this, no, wait, listen to this, what do you think of this?' If there were more people, eventually we'd just be sitting around listening to Martin's tunes. At one point I told him, 'Martin, we're living in a two-bedroom apartment and you've got a six-bedroom ego. I feel crowded.' But I think that's why he's where he is now, because he's so proud of what he does."

Mull recorded four albums for Capricorn, and although he became close to the president of the company, Phil Walden, Mull claims the label had no idea how to market them. ("They were putting them out in fields and hoping people would find them," he says.) He had one near-hit, a single called "Dueling Tubas," the *Deliverance* theme hilariously

*"Partly Marion" Copyright © 1970 WB Music Corp. & Muddy River Music Co. All rights reserved. Used By permission.

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rendered by out-of-tune tubas. He was working steadily at colleges and clubs like the Boarding House—San Francisco and Boston have always been his best markets. But he wasn't making any money, until he signed with Rollins & Joffe, the firm which also manages Woody Allen and Robert Klein.

"At that time he was traveling around with tap-dancers, a band, horns, craziness," recalls Larry Bresner. "We could always get him work, but if he was getting paid $2,000, it cost him $4,000 to do it. We insisted on getting rid of everybody in the band. That wasn't Martin Mull. Martin Mull was what he did sitting in a chair. The whole key was being able to expose him on a mass level."

Mass level equals television. Mull did a couple of *Cher* shows and was offered the position of band leader on *Saturday Night*. "At that point, I didn't feel it was quite enough for me to do, to sit there and say two or three lines a night," he says, and he turned it down. That may be one reason he has never been asked to host the show; another is more obvious.

A few years ago, Mull went to see the *National Lampoon Show* in New York. He sat right up front and talked with his friend, Peter Boyle, throughout the performance. When he went backstage afterward to congratulate the cast (which included John Belushi, Gilda Radner and Bill Murray), Murray went berserk. He grabbed Mull around the neck and tried

In the middle of his act Martin stopped and said, "Well, Norman, do I have the job?" He did

to choke him, screaming, "I'LL KILL HIM, I'LL KILL THAT FUCKER, HE TALKED THROUGH THE WHOLE THING, I HATE HIM!"

"As I recall, Bill had to be restrained by John Belushi," says Michael O'Donoghue, who worked with Mull on an aborted project titled *Lincoln: The Man, the Car and the Tunnel*. "When Martin left the dressing room, Billy kept screaming after him, 'Medium talent! medium talent!' Of such things show business legends are made."

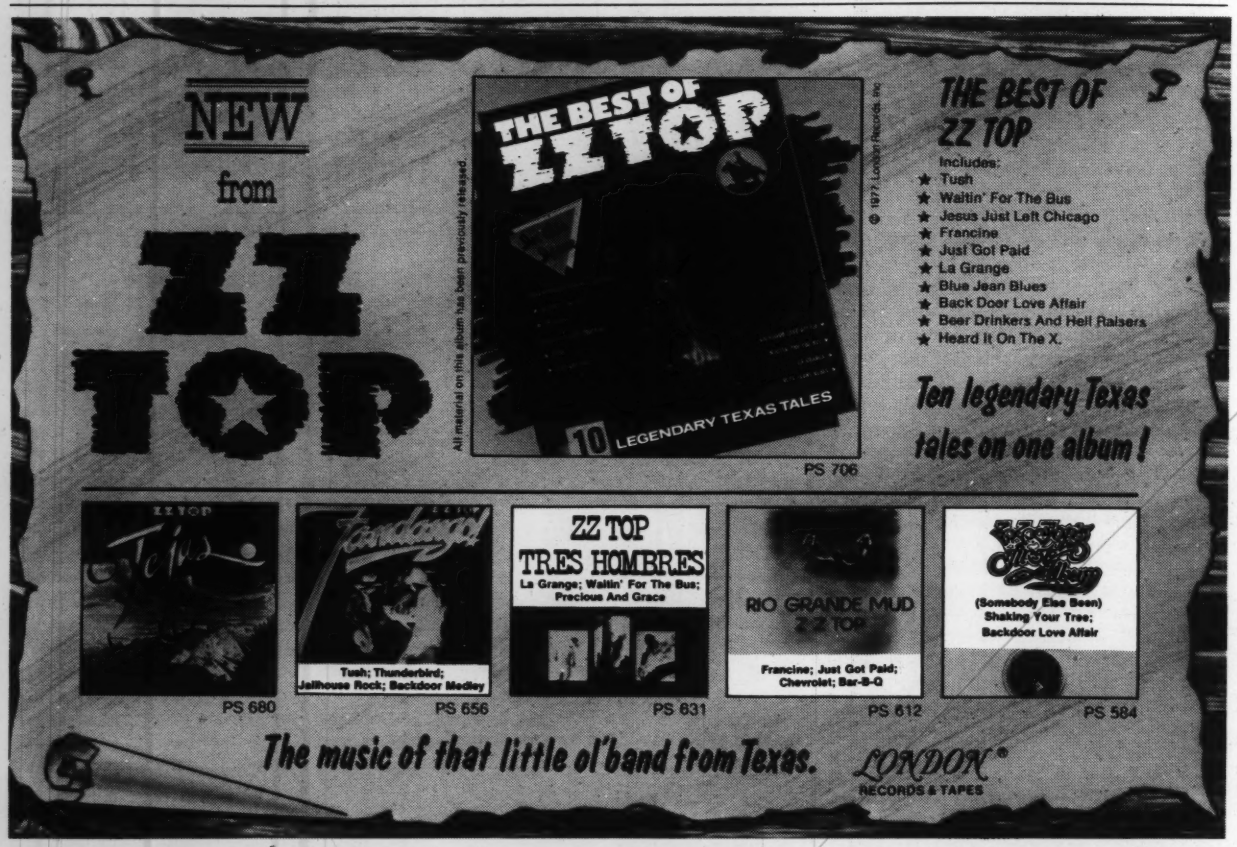
"I feel very bad about that show," says Mull. "I'd had a bit to drink" (he doesn't smoke grass), "and quite frankly, it was more amusing at that point to talk to Peter, whom I hadn't seen in a long time. I confess to having been extremely rude, though not quite as rude as Bill Murray trying to strangle me afterward."

Then came *Mary Hartman*. "I thought they hired me because I was a comedian," Mull says. "I was kind of surprised when all of a sudden we got all this Virginia Woolfish high drama. I didn't like the character at all. I don't care for violence, and wife beating is particularly repugnant to me, so it was quite hard."

When Garth was killed off, the plan was to bring Mull back as a twin brother later in the season. But Al Burton saw him as the ideal host for *Fernwood 2-Night*. Norman Lear, however, had never seen Mull's stage act, so a special night at the Roxy was arranged. In the middle of his act Martin stopped and said, "Well, Norman, do I have the job?" He did.

Fernwood 2-Night was the perfect vehicle for Mull; he has been playing Barth Gimble since the first time he appeared on stage. The character incorporated some of the most basic comic shticks: the classic Gleason/Carney relationship between Barth and Jerry Hubbard (brilliantly played by Fred Willard, of the Ace Trucking Company), the exaggerated exasperation of Jack Benny, and the disgusted stare of Oliver Hardy, as lifted by Johnny Carson. (How long can it be before Mull is perceived as the obvious successor to Carson?)

"Martin was the one who realized that the show had to be more real," says Harry Shearer, "as opposed to just raiding the files of topics taboo for TV. There was one meeting where one of Norman Lear's vice-presidential flunkies said, 'This reality shit is OK for Andy Warhol, but we're doing TV.' That was



Live from Fernwood, It's Fernwood 2-Night!

Barth Gimble and his Fabulous Furniture: William W.D. "Bud" Prize (Kenneth Mars) expounds on expanding tourism in Fernwood, as Barth and Jerry Hubbard (Fred Willard) sit transfixed. Earlier, Mull's friend Tom Waits sang a song, sat on the couch and took a swig from his flask. "It's not often that we have a guest with a bottle in front of him," said Barth, to which Waits shot back, "I'd rather have a bottle in front of me than a frontal lobotomy." He later maintained that "Reality is for people who can't face drugs"

The dark side of the son: "A lot of times," says Barth, "when a star does rise to the top, the first thing they do is buy their parents a beautiful big ranch home in Arizona. But I couldn't really do that, because I said, hey, where's the man's dignity in a case like that, living in a house that he didn't pay for. So I did something else. I got my father a job. He lives with me now, and it's kind of comforting, too, to wake up in the night and know that that dad that meant so much to you is just as close as the couch down in the living room"

Barth deserves a break today: Jerry Hubbard describes his bus-riding experiences (he always sits right behind the driver, in the "captain's seat"), while bandleader Happy Kyne (Frank de Vol) waits to get in a plug for his local hamburger emporium, Fernwood's fabulous Bun 'n' Run

Close encounters of the nerd kind: Fernwood's unofficial ambassador, the inescapable Bud Prize, takes time out of a lengthy explanation of his chin garb to debate Sylvia Miller (Fannie Flagg) on the virtues of interplanetary rape, which Barth labels "sexual outer-course"

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL FEDER

TV dinner: "The human body requires burgers," says otherwise-vegetarian Susan Cloud (Susan Elliot), seen here treating the cast to her organic pizza. The gentleman with the bowtie on his napkin is singer Tony Roletti (Bill Kirchenbauer), Fernwood's answer to John Davidson

what he was up against."

"What we didn't do, that a lot of television does do," says Mull proudly, "is we didn't say to ourselves, 'Whoops, we're missing the dumb-belt contingent, we better make sure we have more tits and ass, or more fart jokes.' Occasionally I would get extremely antsy because I thought some of the acts were a little bit toward a *Gong Show* kind of thing, and to me, you don't have to have a grandmother who plays the tuba and tap-dances at the same time—that's not funny to me, because it's a reach. To me, just having a grandmother, period, come on and talk about her grandchildren and show photos is much funnier. It's not as obvious."

What is obvious is the appeal of the concept to Mull. Like his songs, the show started with one absurd premise—what if the town of Fernwood decided to produce its own talk show?—and took the idea to its limits.

So if you'll beg my pardon
I'm goin' out and start a garden
It'll just be small potatoes
Just some lettuce and tomatoes
And if either one comes up,
we'll join the Grange
What say you and I get normal
*for a change.**

Martin Mull's garden is a small sod lawn that cost only $38. ("It's just back from the cleaners," he says.) It is in back of the modest Malibu house he shares with his new love, *Fernwood* costume designer Sandra Baker, her two children and two dogs; the beach is a few hundred feet away. He clearly enjoys being normal for a change.

It's 80 degrees out in the yard, but Martin is wearing brown pants, a green turtleneck and a tan jacket with a "Bah! Humbug!" button, in preparation for a photo shoot for the cover of the Christmas issue of *Ampersand*, a college monthly.

"Did you hear about the three Polacks who froze to death at a drive-in?" he asks. "They went to see *Closed for the Season*."

His manager calls to discuss a possible book deal. "If it works out," he says,

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The result is Irish Mist:

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And the return of "The Gift of the Gods."

A drink of exceptional character.

With a zest, levity and smoothness all its own.

The perfect balance of potency, good taste and bouquet one would expect from "The Legendary Spirit of Man."

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Imported Irish Mist.

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IRISH MIST: THE LEGENDARY SPIRIT OF MAN.

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"I'll be limited to books, records, TV, movies, live performances and art."

Martin is not above poking fun at himself—the cover of his latest album for ABC, *I'm Everyone I've Ever Loved*, shows him reclining on a couch gazing lovingly into a hand mirror, surrounded by signed photographs of himself. He is trying to get his stage persona more in sync with his private one, which, he observes, "would not totally remove the smug arrogance."

Barth Gimble was the perfect comic symbol for the seventies, a con man who revealed his ignorance even as he thought he was being incredibly hip

He is excited about the return of *Fernwood 2-Night*, mainly because the show allows him so much creative freedom. "I'm lucky," he says. "The stuff that makes me happy has enough in common with enough people that it can become a commodity. There are a lot of people who, given complete license, can have the time of their life and have the communication of a rock."

The Norman Lear organization is talking about a network sit-com after *Fernwood* runs its course. "I would have to have enough control over the thing that it wouldn't compromise me," he says. "I'm still very young, I'm still looking forward to making money, as opposed to trying to maintain some sort of lifestyle by selling out." His managers want him to come up with a screenplay that he could direct and star in.

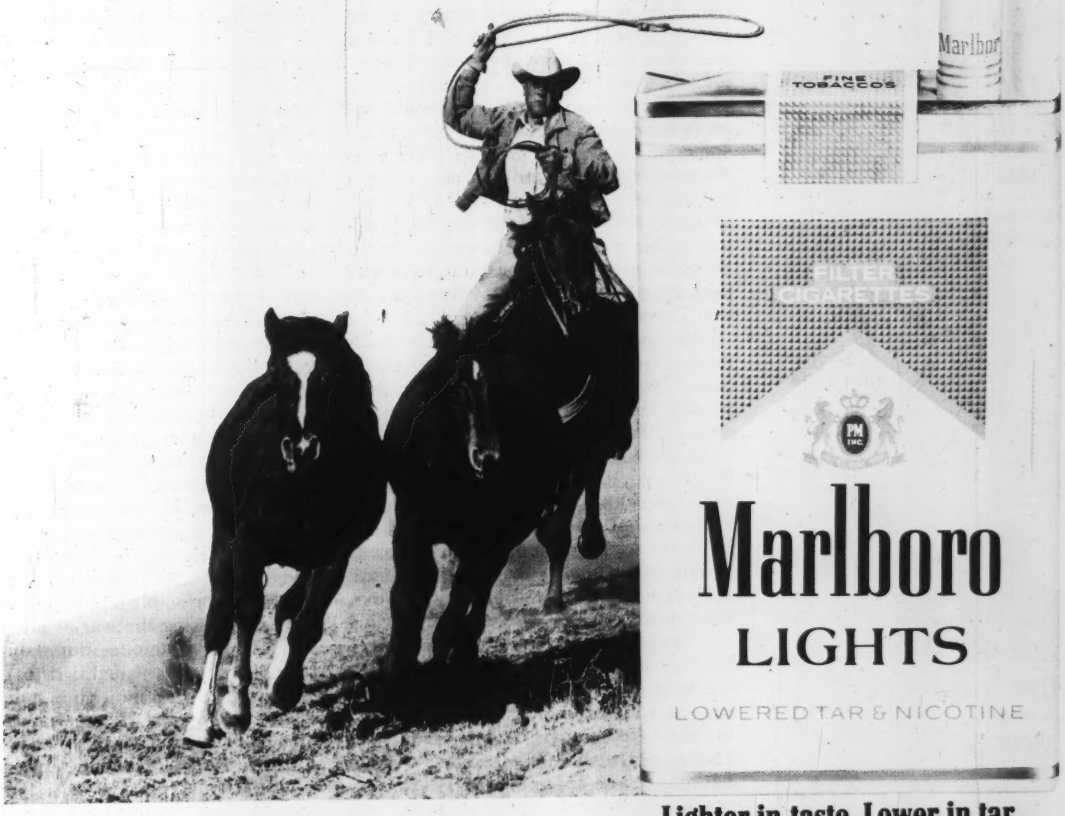
"What I really want to do with my life," he says, "is take Sandra and the family to the south of France, find a little chateau, set up the easel and paint."

Martin Mull is a lucky man. He is getting paid for being funny, which is like a "normal" person getting paid for breathing. He is at last getting the recognition which, in his own words, he has so desperately deserved. He is unlikely to be spoiled by success—he's been ready for it for too long.

Two women come by to shoot the photo. He walks over to the outdoor fireplace. "I could be hanging up a pair of panty hose and hoping that Santa fills 'em with the proper item," he suggests. They ask for a quote about Christmas. "I'm very hard to buy for," Martin says. "Do you want a list of things? I think I should publish my sizes. Just a simple Christmas, and if all I receive is a Mercedes-Benz 280SL, hey, I was with my folks." ●

Marlboro Lights

The spirit of Marlboro in a low tar cigarette.



Lighter in taste. Lower in tar. And still offers up the same quality that has made Marlboro famous.

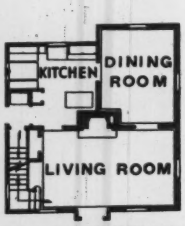
12 mg "tar," 0.7 mg nicotine av. per cigarette, FTC Report Aug.'77

Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health.

How Things

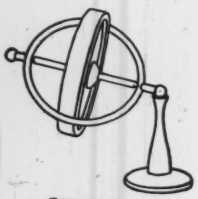
(*A Simple Guide to Everyday Technology* reprinted and diagrams. Overbearing Press, N.Y.,

STREAMLINE TRAIN
figure 1



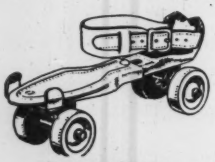
PLAN FOR ONE FLOOR OF A HOUSE
figure 2

FUNNELS
figure 3



GYROSCOPE
figure 4

FAGOT
figure 5



ROLLER SKATE
figure 6

The common incandescent lamp (figure 1) is based on a principle discovered by Ohm but repressed by the Church until it was cut in for a big percentage. The lamp consists of a filament, a bulb, a base and something attractive yet durable to carry it in. Tungsten is obtained from its ore in the form of a black powder, converted into pencil-sized rods, then quickly turned back into a black powder by a process known as "sintering." If sintering is impractical, capering is acceptable, but only during off-hours and in the lounge. Tungsten has a very high melting point and is therefore known as a "nice" metal. It can be heated to a temperature of 3,000° C., above which it should not be held in the cupped hands except by someone known as "Goofy." The lamp filament is made by pulling the tungsten through dies which are so small that nobody can see them. Some idea of the extreme thinness of the filament wire can be conveyed by closing your eyes and thinking of something very tiny, like an ant. There!

The envelope or bulb (b) is usually made of clear or slightly frosted glass. Sometimes it is black and completely opaque, in which case it must bear the stamp "Manufactured by Ninnies."

After the filament (a) is inserted into the envelope, the air is evacuated and young, healthy electrons are introduced in groups of twos and threes until the space is entirely filled. Those electrons arriving late may wait in the bar until something opens up. To light the lamp, the current (c) is switched on, causing the sleeve (d) to contact the armature (e through j). This allows the electrons to travel at great speed (156,000 miles per second except near a school) along the filament (remember?) which creates a certain "pressure," especially if you have an early appointment. The entire process is known as *vulcanization* and can be stopped only by a lawyer's letter.

Marshall Brickman, a master of mechanics, writes for The New Yorker *and is learning the technical art of motion pictures.*

Television. In 1905 Roentgen found that if he stood in front of a translucent phospher plate, which was then bombarded by electrons emitted by a high-intensity cathode-ray tube, all of his hair would fall out. The modern home television receiver (figure 2) is nothing but a cathode-ray tube with the addition of electrostatic focusing and deflection capability, but you have to twist a few arms to get anybody to admit it. The electron beam (a) is first concentrated and then moved to and fro (in cheaper sets, just fro), appearing on the screen (b) as a spot of light or Harry Reasoner (check your local listings). Some viewers enjoy the spot of light while others prefer to wait for Reasoner. The *absence* of electrons under the right conditions could give Reasoner a black tooth or a mole, but this is generally discouraged. To review: The electron beam (measured in *lumens*, but not very often) *scans* the surface of the screen in a zig-zag motion, line by line, until a picture is built up, rather like what occurs inside a television receiver. In the television studio, of course, the *exact opposite* takes place! That is, the electron beam remains stationary and the audience moves back and forth. Inside the television camera is found the *image orthicon* tube. An interesting experiment you can perform at home is to say the word "orthicon" over and over to yourself until it ceases to have any meaning and you feel slightly demented. This is known as the Doppler Effect or Weirdke's principle and was used by the Germans during the war as a torture interrogation technique, but only at parties.

Sound and Music. Helmholtz, an experimental pioneer in the physics of sound propagation, published the equation:

$$[\mu = F/\phi^2]$$

known as the Franz-Weidmann Law (or the Weidmann-Franz Law, depending on who picks up the phone), in which F is the Boltzmann constant and μ, the number of tones a large organ pipe can be made to produce before the police arrive. If a vibrating tuning fork is held over a glass column of a certain height

Don't Work

from the new four-color encyclopaedia, with illustrations 12,000 pp., 2,000,000 references, no index; $1.49)

by Marshall Brickman

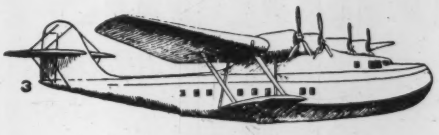


figure 7

(figure 3), the air in the glass will vibrate with the fork. In addition, if a string of fixed length is plucked in the center, a "tone" will be heard, though neither is a big applause-getter. What is lacking is *resonance* and a few light encores, perhaps by Scarlatti. *Resonance* occurs when you lean over and scream as loud as you can into a guitar; the strings are observed to vibrate, after which the instrument should be wiped with a clean, damp cloth to remove the particles of cheese. The *harmonic series* is of special importance to the violinist; without it he would sound just like a kettle drum, and then imagine his surprise! The quality of a note, or its *pitch*, also depends on this process (what process?), in which sound is converted into usable energy by the action of sunlight on the cello (or clarinet), and eventually released into the atmosphere in the form of droplets which under the microscope look like giant raisins (chart A).

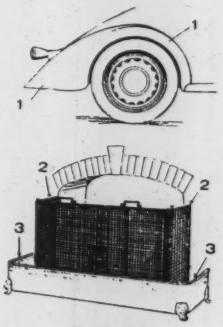
Vision and Eyeglasses. The normal eye (which does not exist) can theoretically see objects at infinity (which does not exist either.) This property is of no use in the exact-change lane or for viewing subtitles, so spectacles or eyeglasses must be worn. In the condition known as *hyperopia* (figure 4), the eyeball is too short and the image does not fall on the retina but somewhere behind it, usually near the sideburns. Conversely, if the eyeball is too tall (*myopia*, or Tinker's Bloat), only objects closer than three feet can be viewed with understanding and pleasure; beyond that it becomes difficult to distinguish between Senator Karl Mundt and a gouda cheese. This defect (if it is a defect) may be remedied by placing a lens in front of the eyeball, which tricks it into thinking the object is closer than it is. The eye is in fact quite easily fooled, but not so easily as the nose, which is a pushover. Recent federal law requires the eye to be protected by a *lid* (in Great Britain, a *bonnet*), which closes at certain times, as during a dust storm or a revival of *The Winslow Boy*. The distance between the eye and the object viewed is not as important as the distance between the eyes themselves, which should be one eyewidth. Nice, long hair is also desirable, and a ready smile. If the distance between the eyes measures less than one-quarter inch, a condition known as "rat-face" (*Rattengesicht*) results, for which there is no effective remedy other than a dense fog.

Clocks and Timekeeping. Any periodically repeated phenomenon can be utilized for time measurement, except sneezing, wich is annoying to the other passengers. The ancients measured time by casting stones off a tower; when all the stones were gone, it was declared to be "November" and everyone went away. Before the day was divided into hours, minutes, and seconds, appointments were an impossibility and life chaotic. People merely showed up and hung around, hoping to be invited in. Because no one knew what "time" it was, dinner was often eaten before, or worse, during breakfast, and it was not uncommon for the king to celebrate his own birthday four or five times in one week. In the 17th century, periodic movement was provided by a *pendulum*, powered by a *weight*, and entertainment by Mr. Bobalu, the Singing Gaucho. Each time the pendulum (consisting of a *rod* and a *bob*, figure 5) reaches its maximum amplitude, a tooth of the escape wheel is released and the wheel advances. If not, somebody has done a lot of work for nothing. The frequency of the pendulum can be varied by sliding the bob along the rod, or, failing that, the pod along the snood. There is also a spindle, an anchor, and a gear chain, all of which can be easily repaired by striking them several sharp blows with a claw-hammer. Newton observed that since the gravitational field of Jupiter is far greater than that of Earth, anyone using a grandfather clock to tell time on that planet will invariably be late for appointments, whereas on the moon he will always be early. Newton himself was never on time for anything in his life, and, as Max Planck often observed with respect to celestial mechanics, "It is best to phone ahead."●

PERCOLATOR
figure 8

SIREN, def. 3
figure 9

MILESTONE
figure 10



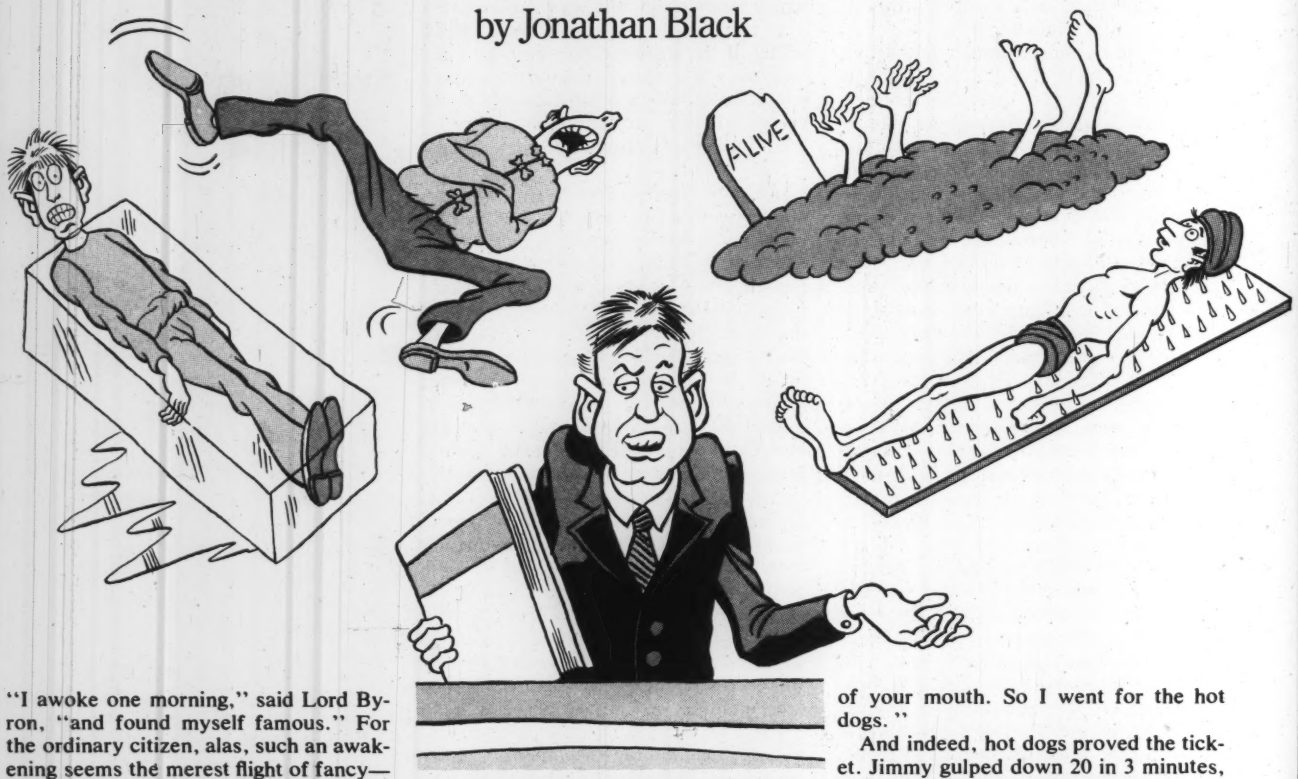
FENDERS
figure 11

TELEPHONES
figure 12

Talk About Dubious Achievements!

The Guinness Book of Records has spawned a new American subculture, whose citizens spend their days choking down hot dogs and peeling apples (would you believe a 172-foot peel?) in training for an Olympics of the bizarre

by Jonathan Black



"I awoke one morning," said Lord Byron, "and found myself famous." For the ordinary citizen, alas, such an awakening seems the merest flight of fancy—unless, of course, you're willing to push a perambulator 319 miles in 24 hours or squat for 399 days on a telephone pole. Thanks to the democratic folks at Guinness, who publish that blockbuster bible of Biggest, Mostest and Weirdest, there's a special place reserved for you, the little guy. To wit, in Chapter 11's "Stunts and Miscellaneous Endeavors" and "Eating Records," where you needn't rely on pituitary or actuarial oddity for a shot at global notoriety. Here, amid records for threading a needle and making noodles, fame is only a pogo-stick jump away. Here, to join Byron is to choke down just a few more pickled onions. Certainly just such tempting thoughts pulsed through the head of Jimmy Davenport that historic day in March when the annual Guinness-inspired Goofy Games arrived at the Lexington (Kentucky) Mall.

Reminiscing about the first time he lined up at the trench, Jimmy Davenport, a Lexington cab driver, explains, "I guess I just wanted to let people know who I was. Let 'em know I can do this and do that. The first time out I tried eggs. But those hard-boiled eggs are hard to get down. They kinda stick to the roof of your mouth. So I went for the hot dogs."

"We took out burial alive. We took out ice encasements. And we're eliminating bed of nails"

And indeed, hot dogs proved the ticket. Jimmy gulped down 20 in 3 minutes, 33 seconds to set a new world record. Yet wary's the head that wears the crown, so Jimmy embarked on his quest to tighten his grip on the 1978 edition. He more than halved the existing time for eating 2½ pounds of shrimp. He confronted his old nemesis—and bettered the time for swallowing 14 hard-boiled eggs, a record held by England's redoubtable Peter Dowdeswell (also beer-drinking king). Jimmy defended his titles in Baltimore, New Orleans, and finally headed for Philadelphia and Veterans Stadium, where, before 32,000 witnesses, he planned to put the frankfurter record away for keeps. How could he possibly have recognized the dangerous pretender to the throne, the slim, sexy coed beside him, whose mysterious smile alternated between Jimmy and her

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TONY DE ZUNIGA

imposing plateload of franks. Little did he know this to be the legendary Linda Kuerth, whose name had first shuttled across UPI wires after she consumed an epic of 15 banana splits at Olivette College, Michigan. Little did Jimmy know that, while he was downing his strategic pre-contest meal the night before ("to swell the stomach"), Linda was tossing down baked potatoes, salads and four T-bone steaks at Jimmy's Steak House. And when the big scoreboard clock read 3 minutes, 10 seconds, the amazing Linda had stolen both the hearts of the screaming crowd and the title with an astonishing 23 frankfurters!

"Myself, I can't really see how she done it," says the still stunned Jimmy. "I was watching her. I don't know. I believe that was kind of a rigged up thing. I can't explain it. I just believe something was wrong."

"I psyched him," expains Linda. "I smiled a lot. He went into it as *work*. While I just kept grinning. Also I think the crowds got to him. When he'd eaten before it was always at a mall. With just a few spectators."

Already Linda has heard rumors of 22 hot dogs eaten last month, but she's confident she can meet and turn back any challenge. She modestly attributes her unique process to nothing more than cool nerves and high metabolism. Like other superstar eaters (the greatest living "trencherman" is 68-year-old "Bozo" Miller, who once knocked off 27 two-pound pullets at a single sitting), Linda bites and swallows but never chews. A slight exception to this standard technique is explained by Bob Blackmore, a champion lemon eater who last year nipped contender Davenport when Jimmy risked a fateful breath of air before his third, and last, lemon: "Obviously I don't eat them," says Blackmore, manager of a Michigan Hospitality Motor Inn. "I just swallow the quarters. But I do bite into the first one just to get the juices, so I'm used to the sour taste. The rest, you just shove down your throat."

"It's not weight," Boehm answers one telephone query on spaghetti—"tell him he's got to eat one hundred *yards*"

Not surprisingly, a certain hierarchy exists among Guinness aspirants. The man who treads barefoot over blazing hot coals tends to disdain the commonplace yokel who snatches coins off his elbow. Similarly, the artisan coin-snatcher turns a bit contemptuous when mention is made of his lowly Chapter 11 cousin who earns immortality by cramming grapes in his mouth. Generally, however, there is a singular respect—even awe—for the marathon entrant. Thus when Marvin Eakman, 52, picked up his 1978 Guinness at a Minneapolis Doubleday bookstore, he wasted little time in phoning Tim Harty of nearby Coon Rapids to proffer congratulations on Tim's formidable nonstop talk marathon of 144 hours and 4 minutes. Eakman, one-time contender for Lieutenant Governor (80,000 votes at an expenditure, he says, of $155), was himself listed directly below Tim for Longest Political Speech, a title he earned by delivering a 30-hour job on "The New Involvement" at the local high school. "I was quite fascinated that he talked so long," said Eakman, explaining his let's-get-acquainted call to Harty. "I called him to see what my chances were at something longer. I suggested we meet for a cup of coffee. We won't be there long, I chuckled, just a couple of hours."

For his part, Tim was delighted to get the call; he welcomes all the publicity he can get. If one is to believe him—as he insists we should—his capture of the talking marathon and his subsequent yo-yo endurance record were merely training schemes in preparation for his ultimate assault on the prized 45-day piano marathon, which in turn was the plotted climax of his plan to lure Elton John, his idol, to the wilds of Minneapolis. Unlike Eakman, whose sober speech elaborated on Minneapolis as a metaphor for the ills of the world, Tim was quite content to read arbitrary items from newspapers, until his eyes gave out around the 30th hour. "Then I counted from one to a million. If anyone asked me a question I answered the question and made a few comments. Nothing important was said, really."

Another marathon that won Guinness fame but has yet to yield its anticipated payoff was the stunning effort turned in by 27-year-old rock & roll drummer

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Tracy "Super Solo" Burroughs of Connecticut. Tracy's anguished saga began four years ago, after his band broke up. There followed those typical hassles about auditions, and yet another manager's broken promise found Tracy hunched in his Westport room, groaning, "*God*, I gotta *do* something to get *recognition*." Magically, the solution presented itself in the Guinness record for Duration Drumming. However, Tracy's nine-day triumph was bettered the following year and, the music business being what it is, Tracy again found his head in a bad place. So this past June he descended into the cellar of Copperfield's in Greenwich Village, resolving to put the record on ice for keeps. He had trained rigorously for four and five hours a day at home. During the marathon in Copperfield's basement, he maintained strength with thrice-daily brews of safflower oil, yeast, Liverall and Bob Hoffman's protein powder. He subsisted on two hours' sleep a night, endured the unpleasant murmurs of spectators who questioned the rapidity of his drumming ("At least I was keeping the beat, which isn't easy for three weeks . . .") and suffered less than gracious hospitality from the owner of Copperfield's, who refused to fix his fan when some drunk knocked it over, and forced him to "beg" for roast beef. Yet when the ordeal was over and Tracy finally staggered into daylight, after 21 days, there were neither cheering throngs nor promoters waving contracts.

"I thought people would think, 'Wow, what a drummer!' Instead they just thought of me as some kind of freak. Like a flag-pole sitter. When I started the marathon, I figured this was really going to blow everyone's mind! But I guess," reflects Tracy, "it didn't blow people's minds enough."

A still sadder tale emanates from Lexington, Kentucky (apparently a hotbed of Guinness activity), where 41-year-old Marie Fosby works at the local Dixie Cup factory. For the past two years, Marie's plant has been manufacturing colorful children's cups bearing such Guinness memorabilia as the World's Longest Fingernails and the World Record for Rivetting. Every day fleeting fame passed maddeningly through Marie's fingers. Finally she decided enough was enough. A yodeler from childhood, she promptly knocked off the existing "Protracted Yodel" record with a mighty 6-hour effort. Alas, in the interim—and unbeknownst to Marie—a silver-throated Canadian had tossed off a 7½-hour yodel.

"If I'd only known," laments Marie. "I could have gone longer. I could have gone *8* hours."

More experienced Guinness hopefuls take precautions to avert such a calamity. Doug Ziegler first broke the world pogo-stick jumping record on August 10,

"Let me tell you—don't think it's easy taking a leak on a pogo stick!"

his 12th birthday. The feat was duly notarized and sent to England. But when the 1975 Guinness came out one year later, Doug's mark had been topped by a girl from California. "We were stupid," acknowledges Doug's father, Donald. "A lot of areas are never touched: someone with 67 kids, you don't expect that record to be broken next year with 68. But we were new to this thing." So the next year the Zieglers wised up. They craftily waited until May, one month before Guinness' closing. (An interim record had been unearthed by Donald.) Doug bounced his way to 1977 fame with 64,649 jumps in the parking lot of his father's International House of Pancakes. However, the effort took its toll: painful arthritis of the knee. And while Doug was hobbling around his Allentown, Pennsylvania, home, a determined challenger, young Bill Hanrahan, was polishing up several rigorous years of training in Waterford, Connecticut. "I kinda noticed I was better at it than everybody

else," says Bill, explaining his drive for the title. "I can remember the first time I did 5,000. Then I can remember a couple of weeks later trying 10,000. I was building up that whole summer. After doing 40,000 I felt pretty good. I was pretty confident then I could go all the way."

Unhappily for Doug Ziegler, his Connecticut nemesis went "all the way" with 70,000 jumps just two days before Doug's scheduled TV appearance on Mid-Day Live. The news cast a pall over the Ziegler home. But arthritic knees or not, pride and fierce determination left no choice: recapture the title. So out went Doug to the parking lot. While his mother supplied Bob Hoffman's Energalls and cloths soaked in ice water, Doug jumped what his delighted father describes as "a phenomenal and unsurpassable 80,080." Unsurpassable it was. Yet a cloud of controversy still hangs over the 1978 pogo stick entry. For while Ziegler is listed first under "greatest number of jumps," there follows immediately Hanrahan who "jumped 70,076 *without* any rest breaks." (italics, Guinness).

The problem stems from the Guinness allowance of five-minute "rest-intervals" after each hour in *most* marathon categories. However, according to Bill Hanrahan's dad, no such permission was granted his son. "I'm in a quandry," he confesses. "I'm completely baffled, because I've got *letters* from this gal in England stating no rests. I said, 'How does he go to the bathroom?' And she said, 'No rests.' Well, let me tell you—don't think it's easy taking a leak on a pogo stick!"

Doug Ziegler's father finds it somewhat hard to believe that Bill Hanrahan *did* take a leak from his pogo stick. "It's not sour grapes," he prefaces. "But I just *know* he didn't do that many jumps without stopping. They don't build sticks to last like that, that's all there is to it. It's like you telling me you skateboarded from here to Australia."

Fortunately for the genial, ruddy-faced, white-haired gentleman named David Boehm who serves as Guinness' American editor, all such flaps—in fact all rules and arbitration—are established and settled in the English Guinness office at Enfield, Middlesex. Boehm has plenty to do just answering his mountains of mail. Having just fielded a telephone query on spaghetti—"It's not weight; tell him he's got to eat 100 *yards*"—he pauses to answer the World's Most Common Request: How do I get into the book?

By breaking *existing* records, says Boehm wearily. Guinness has precious little space for newly concocted categories. On page 214 of the newest and fattest edition yet, Guinness lists itself as the World's Fastest Selling Title (30 million copies sold globally, in 14 languages). Already, points out Boehm,

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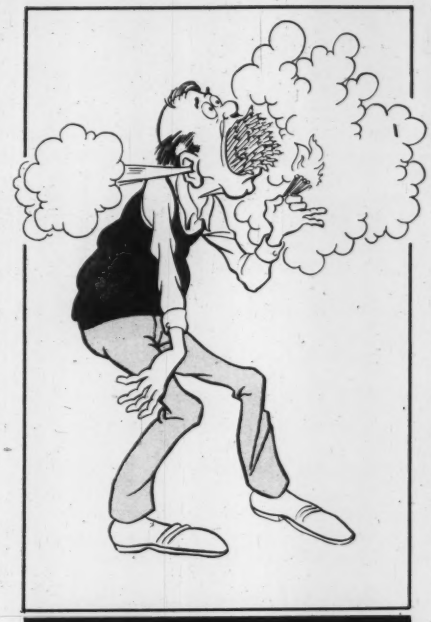
I AM OVER 21 YEARS OF AGE

several categories are on the way out: "We took out burial alive. We took out ice encasement. And strait jackets. There were too many people trying to escape and no precise standards. And we're eliminating bed of nails. Too dangerous. There's one guy threatening to have a Greyhound *bus* run over him."

Certainly one of the more peculiar and grueling—though nonlethal—Chapter 11 categories is that of Brick Carrying, an event which requires that an 8-pound, 12-ounce brick be carried (for distance) in a downward position in a "nominated ungloved hand." The grim effect of the brick is confirmed by the dual men's record-holders, the brothers Barger (David and Kym) of Lamar, Missouri. "I can't even describe it to you," says the older David. "It's easy the first couple of miles. But after 20 miles that brick starts doing things to your mind you wouldn't believe. I'm 21 years old and I had to be *carried* to the bathtub. I couldn't stand up for two days. Whoever made up that category really had something. It's weird."

David's 45-mile trek down Missouri's Highway 71 actually began one quiet night five years before when he and a buddy, Craig Finley, were hanging out in Lamar's town square and ended up buying a dozen eggs and carrying the carton up to the football field. "If you've ever lived in a town with 4,000 people, well, you have to really dig to the bottom of the barrel to find something to do," says David, explaining his successful assault that night on the Guinness record for tossing a fresh hen's egg for distance and catching the egg without breaking, a Guinness record held by retired L. A. Ram quarterback Roman Gabriel and TV's David Frost. Some months later David Barger and Craig were back on the football field with Lamar's mayor, cheering witnesses and their high school science teacher, who'd coached them on the precise velocity and angle of ascent required. On their 11th exchange David deflected the flying egg with his chest, then trapped it unbroken in his hands as he toppled to the turf with a new world record of 316 feet. All hell broke loose that night in Lamar and, ever since, young brother Kym has been plotting for similar immortality. "The main thing involved was time," explains David. "We didn't have enough time for one of those five- or six-day things. We wanted to be able to do something on a Saturday. We were thinking about the crawling record. We were considering getting five guys together and trying to leapfrog 25 miles. We tried to find something that was easy. But a third of the way through that brick-carry we realized we were really in for it!"

The crawling record was also a temptation to Gary Shaw, 17. "I was thinking about it," he admits, "but I just didn't want to be seen crawling around like



On their eleventh exchange, David deflected the flying egg with his chest, then trapped it in his hands as he toppled to the turf with a new record: 316 feet

that. I was also thinking about the bell-ringing. You get paid $2.50 an hour ringing a bell for the Salvation Army at Christmas. But all the jobs were filled up." His options somewhat limited, Gary lifted one foot and balanced on the other for 12 hours (topping the previous record for Balancing on One Foot by more than 3 hours). "It wasn't hard. I knew I could do it from the beginning. I guess I was just born with balance."

Being born with a gift or skill rarely helps qualify for Chapter 11 inclusion, though on rare occasions championship talent is passed from one generation to the next. Such was certainly the case with Kathy Wafler of Wolcott, New York, whose father sliced an impressive 900-inch peel off a Red Delicious apple in 1969. When a Wolcott neighbor subsequently bettered his mark, Mr. Wafler set about training his daughter for the peel that would hopefully restore the lost glory to the family. In 1975, Kathy succeeded with an astounding 172-foot unbroken round off a 20-ounce apple after 11½ hours of painstaking work. "You can't do it the way you peel apples for a pie," she explains. "First I go around and around with the knife leaving the rounds about 1/32 inch apart. The whole peel is on the apple. Then I come under with the knife and go right underneath the skin and just lift it up. It takes some mental preparation. You have to be positively psyched. You can't say, 'Oh, my God—what am I *doing* here?' "

If mental preparation is considered a key ingredient by most Chapter 11 veterans, then durability of fame is a perennial concern. Some feats are naturally more secure than others. Dr. Randolph Seed's lightning charge (14 minutes) up the 100 flights of Chicago's John Hancock building is rendered safe by two factors: Seed at that time *lived* in the Hancock building and could practice at will; plus, the few 100-story structures, Hancock included, have since forbidden Guinness-inspired pranks. (Also, Seed is left-handed and the Hancock's stair rails are conveniently on the left; Seed feels use of the rail is entirely proper). Another self-assured entrant, and another MD, is Dr. Robert Kaufman of New York City, whose sizeable den is completely lined with racks of plastic tubes containing 7,015 *different* cigarette brands (world's largest cigarette collection). "I've been collecting for 50 years," says the confident Kaufman, pointing out a rare Japanese Prisoner of War cigarette made in Hong Kong. "You hear about others beginning collections. But nothing ever comes of it."

In fact, collections are no longer a very promising avenue to fame. Each year David Boehm posts hundreds of mimeoed letters informing misguided Guinness aspirants that "the mere amassing of large quantities of commonly acquired objects is not the kind of record that belongs in a book of this nature—devoted as it is to human endeavors requiring skill, know-how, ingenuity and talent." And there follows a list of inadmissable categories ("singly or in lengths") ranging from pop-top chains to pebbles and acorns.

"The majority of queries are useless. A bunch of kids putting together chewing gum wrapper chains," sighs the disgruntled Boehm, and, as if proof were needed of man's odd obsessive quest for fame, he wearily trots out his weekly stack of letters. "Here we are, look at this. 'Most territory traveled during a game of gin rummy.' We don't even *cover* gin rummy. Here's one. 'Tiniest walnut.' Well, we don't take *smallest*. The thing is, if you *pick* them small you *get* them small. It's probably just an *immature* walnut. Look at this. 'My husband has trained two German Sheperds to play Five-Card Draw and Three-Card Monte. They also play pool. . . .' Hmmmm . . . Well, I suppose, there could be something there. We already have dog frisbee. Gambling dogs? Hmmmm . . ." ●

Portrait of the Artist As a Young Manic

by Mark O'Donnell

Coney Island

DAD: Hey kids!!! Wouldja like to go to Coney Island this weekend, ride all the rides, eat cotton candy and soda pop, buy balloons and win prizes?!!

KIDS (excited): Yeeeeeeay!!!

DAD (harshly): Well, you *can't*. I'm playing golf this weekend. It's out of the question.

(blackout)

Public Service Message

Hi, kids. I'm Jim Plunkett—[He plays with a football]—with a safety tip for all you youngsters who like sports and games and playing and being alive in general. . . .Kids, don't allow yourselves to be buried alive.

If you find yourself in a coffin with people crying all around you, watch out! Wave your arms, sit up, or otherwise attract attention to your condition. DO NOT reinforce their opinion of you as dead. Flares may be used for this purpose, but do so only with adult supervision.

Some preventive tips: Never simulate death for long periods of time—avoid heavy sleeping. In fact, it might be best not to sleep at all. Do not let your parents coerce you into going to bed, or you may suffer the fate of entombment while you still live. . . with no escape, no hope but to scratch the forever closed lid of your dirt-surrounded casket, and cry into the deaf and airless dark.

Play it smart, champ. Don't get buried alive.

VOICE OVER: This public service message has been sponsored by the National Safety Council and the Committee to Eliminate Live Child Interment, P.O. Box 1975, Washington, D.C.

The Mentalist

(The mentalist speaks urgently, mystically, nonstop, tensely. His assistant holds up an orange. He is blindfolded.)

THE GREAT MARCONI: I'm picking up a signal from the audience. . . I'm getting a fruit! Yes, it's a fruit . . . It's round, its color is . . . midway between red and yellow . . . It has seeds, pulp, rind . . . a frozen breakfast juice concentrate is made from it . . . It's a citrus fruit . . .

ASSISTANT: Yes, yes, Great Marconi!

THE GREAT MARCONI: It's from Florida—!

ASSISTANT: Yes, Great Marconi, almost there!

THE GREAT MARCONI: I'm seeing lemons with it . . . Lemons . . . St. Clemens . . . I'm getting . . . Anita Bryant . . . Bing Crosby . . .

ASSISTANT: Yes, Marconi, yes!

THE GREAT MARCONI (In a casual, defeated mutter): No. It's no good. I've lost the signal . . .

The Insecure Hypnotist

HYPNOTIST: You are getting sleepy. Your eyes are like lead. Sleepy . . . Sleepier . . . You are asleep. You will not awaken until I give the signal. Now then, you will answer all my questions honestly. Are you ready? . . . (Pause) D'you think I should change the way I wear my hair? Or the color? Maybe I should get it styled?

SUBJECT: (In a trance): It looks fine.

HYPNOTIST: Really? Do you really think so? You're not just saying that? For godssake, tell me if you think I should change it.

SUBJECT: No, you're fine.

HYPNOTIST: What about, am I overweight? I worry that I'm too fat.

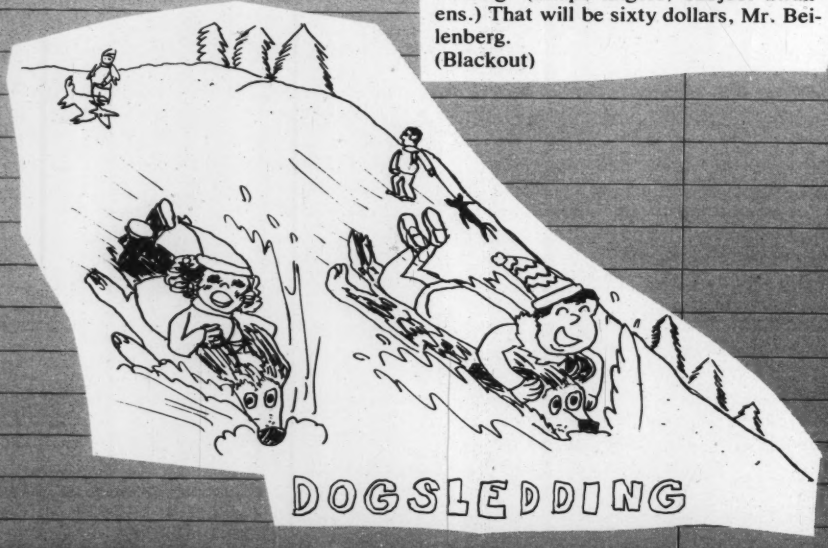
SUBJECT: No, you're fine.

HYPNOTIST: You're just being kind. But I probably look years older than I am, huh?

SUBJECT: No, you're fine.

HYPNOTIST: When I snap my fingers, you will awaken. You will remember nothing. (Snaps fingers, subject awakens.) That will be sixty dollars, Mr. Beilenberg.

(Blackout)



1930s McCall's-style Advertisements:

Be the Most Beautiful Woman On Earth—for less than it costs to blow your nose! Yes, now you can outshine every other woman in the world—at a price any woman can afford! . . .

No wonder others are cool to me—I don't have *Superfine Bunion Relief Pills* handy in my medicine chest, to ease visitors stricken by bunion pain while in my home!

Is CEMENT the secret of Loveliness? Yes, it's no secret that you feel more secure in a home with a firm foundation and that's near well-paved streets. And when you're secure, tension and wrinkle-heightening stress, which can add years to your actual age, is wonderfully lessened. Insist on cement . . . Beautiful!

little boy (hugging his dog): "Gee, Towser, not having the piles is *swell*." (for NoPiles, a safe medication that "combats peplessness.")

a panel drama in which a lonely granny gets her grandchildren to visit her in the ward by switching brands of coffee. Last panel: "Another round of poker, Mickey?" "Sorry, Bill. I don't want to miss seeing my grandma—" (winks to viewer) "—or her great coffee!"

My husband avoided me sexually
My husband refused to consummate our marriage
My father refused to identify my dead body
My children refused my breast
My friends adopted a secret language around me
My family had me repeatedly arrested for trespassing
My pastor started a secret smear campaign against me

Until I wised up and switched to EVER-BRIGHT Flashlight Batteries for our family flashlight! Everyone knows they're best and most practical!

This young lady uses *Gleeno*— And she's about to be assumed into heaven without dying!

* * * *

Rip Van Winkle: The rest is history. **Marco Polo**: A trader in our mist. **Macbeth**: The dread Scot decision.

* * * *

"You've never been convicted of a felony—I like that in a person."

* * * *

"Well, as long as you're in this drunken state, perhaps I could interest you in some faulty insurance or radioactive real estate?"

* * * *

"I'll have the onion rings and a fudge sundae. Oh, it's okay. My mother died today so I can eat whatever I want."

* * * *

My uncle's the "town character"—for Los Angeles.

* * * *

A lot of my songs are written by a four-year-old musical prodigy . . . Now I'd like to sing for you "You're Nothing But Doo-doo Since You Stopped Loving Me" . . . and "Eating Boogers In the Moonlight."

* * * *

From 1,001 Dreams Interpreted:

jaws—the threat of large teeth and yawning jaws is an old augur of the dreamer's incipient madness and death.

jet—to dream of seeing or riding a jet indicates impending death.

Jew—dreams with Jewish characters, especially unfamiliar ones, represent imminent social disgrace and death.

jewelry—usually dreams of shiny, valuable necklaces, earrings, and the like precede the dreamer's death by a few hours.

jockey—to dream of a short man in riding clothes indicates sudden and untimely death.

* * * *

THEY AREN'T POISONOUS!
Yes, mothers, you can serve your children Dinah Lake Pies with confidence—because they aren't at all poisonous. Honest. Don't suppose that they are, because that would be just silly.

* * * *

"Ladies and gentlemen, my mother-in-law... my mother-in-law is so venerable— when she hangs around the house, she really gets a lot of respect!..."

Mister Ignorance

ANNOUNCER: Welcome once again, courtesy of Billardo Luncheon Meats, to an unintimidating evening of facts and fun with that maestro of misprision—Mis-ter Ignorance—! (theme music, applause) Good evening, Mr. Ignorance—!

MISTER IGNORANCE (chipperly): Is it?

ANNOUNCER: And what's the experiment I see you have here in front of us?

MISTER IGNORANCE: You know, for the life of me, I couldn't tell you, Bob.

ANNOUNCER: First off, Mister Ignorance, our guest cadet-assistant tonight is 9-year-old Billy Becker from Fairmount, Connecticut—

MISTER IGNORANCE: You don't say. Oh, there he is. Hello.

ANNOUNCER: And Billy's going to help you combine the baking soda and vinegar in these two cups into this one large beaker.

MISTER IGNORANCE: A *beaker*—I always wondered what you called these things. It's not exactly a bottle, is it?

ANNOUNCER: Billy, feel free to pour the vinegar right on into the beaker. (handing Mister Ignorance the baking soda) Mister Ignorance, will you do the honors?

MISTER IGNORANCE: Sure thing, sure thing. (the mixture foams up and overflows) Migosh, wouldja look at that! It's overflowing here . . . (he is jovial and interested at all times)

BILLY: Jeepers, Mister Ignorance! What makes it do that?

MISTER IGNORANCE: I have no idea, Billy.

ANNOUNCER: And so much for Science. (Billy pushes cart off) Now comes that ever-popular part of our program in which listeners write in with questions about this, that and the other thing—often with surprising results—(clears throat). If any. (reads) A housewife from Bethesda, Maryland, wants to know how to get blood stains off the inside lining of her old steamer trunk. She's tried vacuums, cleansers, even steel wool. (looks to Mister Ignorance)

MISTER IGNORANCE: Gee, I wish I could help you on that, but I'm at a loss. I don't know boo about blood stains.

ANNOUNCER: Another woman writes, "Dear Mister Ignorance—Did you know that African elephants have ears that are much larger than those of Indian elephants?

MISTER IGNORANCE (marveling): Is that a fact?

ANNOUNCER: It is .

MISTER IGNORANCE: Well, isn't that interesting! Live and learn, boy. This is a great show.

ANNOUNCER: Back to matters that are a little closer to home. Our final letter is from a Carbondale, Illinois, man, and he asks if there's any way to tell whether an unopened egg is rotten by floating it in water.

MISTER IGNORANCE: You've got me there, Bob, I have to admit. It would be a handy thing to know. Save a lot of expense, probably.

ANNOUNCER: No ideas at all on that one, Mister Ignorance?

MISTER IGNORANCE: Well, I'd say if the egg sank, it was rotten, but that's just an uninformed guess.

ANNOUNCER: There you have it, folks. The final word from the Sultan of Superfluity, Mister Ignorance. Be with us again in one week's time, when Mr. Ignorance will be looking at how spaghetti is made—

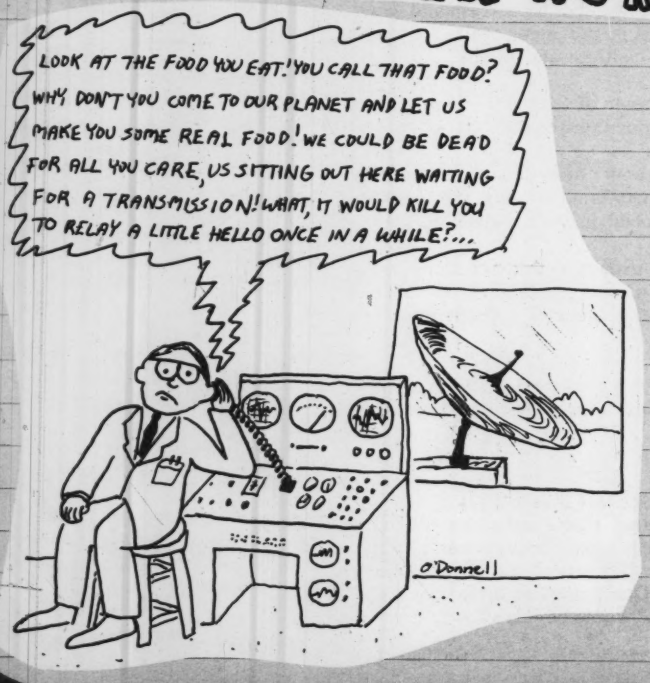
MR. IGNORANCE: You know, I wonder.

ANNOUNCER: Until then, this is Bob Heatherington, reminding you that everybody's smarter than somebody some of the time, but most of the time it's Mister Ignorance. Goodnight, and remember to enjoy Billardo Luncheon Meats.

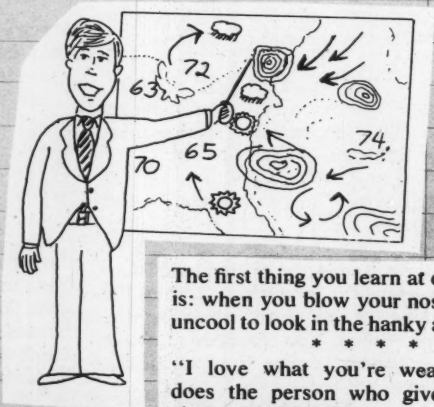
MR. IGNORANCE: I wonder how *they're* made, too. You know, I never even realized that there's two kinds of elephants— (theme music up). Where *is* that music coming from?

—BLACKOUT—

JEWS from OTHER WORLDS?


LOOK AT THE FOOD YOU EAT! YOU CALL THAT FOOD? WHY DON'T YOU COME TO OUR PLANET AND LET US MAKE YOU SOME REAL FOOD! WE COULD BE DEAD FOR ALL YOU CARE, US SITTING OUT HERE WAITING FOR A TRANSMISSION! WHAT, IT WOULD KILL YOU TO RELAY A LITTLE HELLO ONCE IN A WHILE?...
O'Donnell

"Off the Atlantic coast, there has been an influx of large chalk arrows and circles. Vast crayoned numerals have been reported in the Midwest and Middle Atlantic states, and the local forecast is for coy adhesive cutouts of clouds and sun continuing through the weekend..."



The first thing you learn at charm school is: when you blow your nose, it's highly uncool to look in the hanky after.

* * * *

"I love what you're wearing. Where does the person who gives you their clothes buy them?"

OUR WONDERFUL WORLD
copyright TM
The SIAMESE PERSON
For some reason I was born with all my limbs completely connected to my body.
The sponge that was ARRESTED!
A ROCK IN THE SHAPE OF A STONE!
The baby that kissed politicians
Come on, Senator, just a smooch
A CHEESE SO POISONOUS
IT IS EVEN FATAL TO THINK ABOUT!
MOMBA: A PLACE THAT DOESN'T EXIST!
THE LADY WHO COULD INDUCE AMNESIA IN COWS!
I just stare at them...
A HOTEL for SANDWICHES ONLY!
A DOG THAT COULD UNDERSTAND SHEEP!
A typewriter that adds an ITALIAN ACCENT
I'm a so please to make-a you acquaintance

The Pick-up

(A man sits alone in a bar)

MAN: Say . . . Do I come here often? (Waves waiter.) Let me freshen this drink for me. Eddie! (Drink comes.) Don't worry, it's taken care of. (Slaps down change.) . . . I come in here a lot, don't I? Wasn't I here last Friday with a lot of people? No? Oh. Here—I—I have something I'd like me to have. This I. D. bracelet. Oh, it's . . . Oh! I shouldn't have! (Puts it on.) Oh. Listen. They're playing my song. Hey: why don't I get out of here and find someplace quiet to talk? (Pause.) What kind of person do I take me for, anyhow? Just who do I think I am, anyway? Well, forget it. Not if I were the last person on earth! (Pause, looks forlornly in drink, as if newly abandoned.) Eddie? (Gestures for refill.) Fill her up.

The Retard

a new translation of Dostoyevsky's classic

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATOR: Thirteen-year-old Dexter Brenner is the first actual idiot to translate *The Idiot*. He has had no formal training in Russian.

CHAPTER ONE

Cake. I want some cake. Some cake. Give me . . . I . . . a man had a hat. A hat on a man. I saw him today. He was a man and I saw his hat on the man today. Cake. Oh, I am so tired. Cake. Eyes. Want. I . . .

* * * *

Great Moments In Opera:

DIE FLÖDEDMAUS

A song: "Last Night Was Magic, Darling, But I Don't Respect You Now."

* * * *

"Hello, I'd like to subject myself to needless expense,"

"Very good, sir. That will be sixty dollars."

* * * *

The most frustrating thing about assholes is, they're happy and you're not.

* * * *

"Hello, I'm a foreigner. Which way to your children? I want to eat them."

* * * *

Give library books this Christmas—the one gift that *has* to be returned.

* * * *

Your twenties are difficult times. You're too old to be precocious but still too young to play teenagers on TV.

* * * *

I trace my insecurity back to my fourth birthday, when my parents gave me an abandoned refrigerator and a cellophane bag as presents.

* * * *

The secret of happiness: ". . . Get everything you want . . . right away . . . always."

* * * *

THE KING/QUEEN OF DRAG

With the bat of a false eyelash, Craig Russell is making high comedy out of the ambiguity of his life and sex

by Andrew Kopkind

Fifty floors above Times Square, Craig Russell stands at his apartment window, squinting at the distant lights below. As the reigning queen of comedy drag, he has taken New York by storm—not a hurricane, perhaps, but surely a splendid squall that blew in the year's hit sleeper movie (*Outrageous!*) and his smash one-man show off-Broadway. There are so many rave reviews to read that he can hardly find time to unpack; a dozen forlorn dining room chairs and piles of unopened cardboard crates are strewn around the darkened room behind him. Only the vodka, orange juice and a portable radio-cassette player with one Peggy Lee tape seem to be permanently installed so far.

Russell inspires the mischief in me, as he coaxes the camp out of every audi-

PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN PATRICK

How do you like them oranges?: Anita Bryant a la Russell is one of more than 35 women caught in the maestro's drag net

ence. Our conversation, which has been running on and off for two days, has not strayed far from the dialogue of that generalized, all-purpose Old Movie which is the stuff of Russell's art and a metaphor for his life.

"Did you ever *dream*," I ask him archly, "that a dumpy faggot hairdresser from Toronto would become the toast of New York and live in a gorgeous penthouse this high above Broadway and Forty-Second Street?"

Russell stares into the night for a perfect two seconds, then turns sharply with a swivel of the knees and a lurch of the shoulders, like a spastic Stanwyck.

"Let me tell you," he purrs, "I've been higher."

Drag is a place where illusion intersects with identity, where performance merges with personality, art with attitude. Craig Russell stands at those crossroads, making high comedy out of the ambiguity of his life and his sex. He delights in the sudden stardom, but he still finds the dizziest excitement in expressing the hidden women within him—Mae West, Carol Channing, Peggy Lee, Midler, Streisand, Garland. Whether he plays them to a mirror or to an audience of a million moviegoers, he must make them *live*; his soul demands no less.

That he plays them so convincingly is a tribute to his fine madness as well as his keen eye. He has plumbed old forbidden fantasies and gives them uncanny reality as glamorous impersonations of *femmes fatales*.

"I've always considered myself a very androgynous person," Russell says. "The other night, the elevator man

asked me, 'Aren't you Miss Russell?' I said, 'No, *daahling*, Rosalind's not here any more.' At gas stations they say, 'Fill it up, ma'am?' When you play with your sexuality, you realize it more."

As a child in Toronto in the 1950s, Russell played with his gender the way most kids played with toys. At an age when other boys were out practicing their machismo, he was dressing in his mother's fanciest clothes, wrapping towels around his head as turbans and performing primitive drag acts for the family. Not only was he outrageous, his mother recalls, he was hilarious!

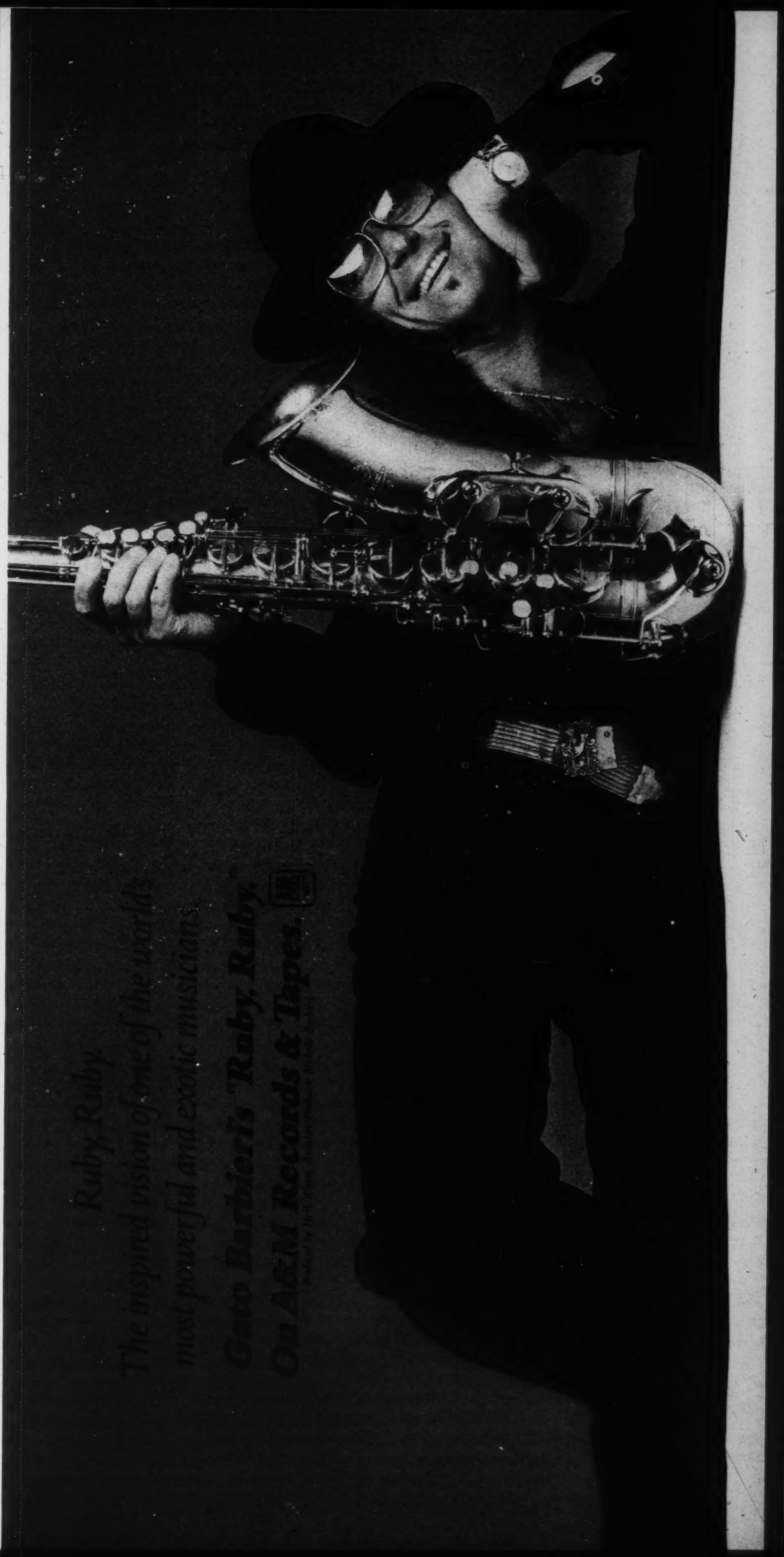
As a child, Russell played with his gender the way most kids played with toys

Russell's earliest idol was Mae West, the most deadly of her species. "I saw her on the Red Skelton TV show and began writing her letters," Russell remembers, "but it wasn't until I was seventeen that I got up the nerve to call her on the phone. I told her I had started a Mae West fan club and that it had 2,000 members. Actually, there were 86—or maybe only one—but whatever, she was impressed. She warned me not to exaggerate: 'over*amp*lified, dear, over*amp*lified.'" Russell repeats the word with reverential mimicry.

Right away he hopped a bus to Hollywood, and according to one of the many versions of that fateful encounter, he was met at the station by Mae West's chauffeur and whisked to a meeting with the great lady herself in Malibu. Acolyte and idol embraced, and Russell returned to Toronto with stars in his eyes. Two years later he was back *chez* Mae; this time she let him try on her gowns and a platinum blond wig; and as Russell commenced his Mae West number, she winked knowingly: "I see you're into *that*."

Russell leads a rich fantasy life, and it is impossible—and probably pointless—to get his chronology, much less his stories, straight. ("Isn't anybody straight any more?" Russell's character, Robin Turner, asks in a scene from *Outrageous!*; all the meanings of the word are equally applicable.) Russell will not be pinned down on dates; his age is set eternally at "twenty-nine," which is, after all, the prerogative of an ageless lady. But for about four years, during the late sixties and early seventies, he kicked around Toronto; briefly, he was the only male typist in an insurance company's secretarial pool, then he went to beauticians' school and became a hairdresser.

But it was not enough to divert his fantasies of glamour and illusion to his cli-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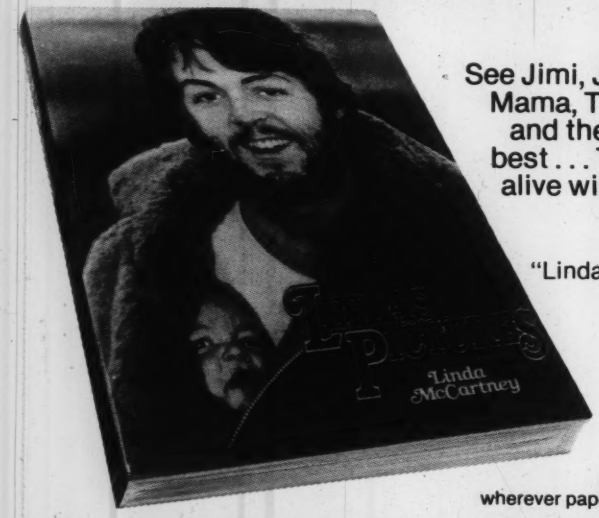
LINDA'S PICTURES

a collection of photographs by Linda McCartney



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ents' weekly hairstyling. Like Robin in the movie, Russell would perform Tallulah Bankhead numbers for himself and his closest friends—one of whom was a young woman named Margaret Gibson, whom he lived with, and loved, for several years. Russell had come out as a homosexual already, but he was afraid to go on the streets in drag. It had been hard enough going out as gay.

"I wore make-up to school to cover up my zits, and everyone would laugh," he remembers bitterly. "I saw myself being accused as a fairy and a faggot and I wondered, *why*? It's like being accused of robbing a bank and not having any money stashed away. I went to gay bars and I felt I was a piece of meat. I used to think, 'You are all going to pay for this—at $3.50 a head.' When I came back it was in a limousine, and I was someone they couldn't avoid. *I was Tallulah*!"

Russell's opening night was Halloween, 1970, when he dressed to the hilt and "made it" as the fabulous Bankhead at a gay masquerade party in Toronto. His act was so stunning, and the attention he drew so commanding, that he soon gave up hairdressing for a life on the road as a "female impersonator." He added Channing to the act, then Garland and Bette Davis and Joan Crawford and Sarah Vaughan—through forty or fifty showbiz ladies up to Rita Coolidge and Cher.

"I gave myself five years to *really* make it," Russell told me. "I played Vegas and Provincetown and the Persian Room in New York. But that wasn't making it. Then I did this movie, and I told Margaret, this is it. This is going to be this year's *Rocky*, but they'll have to call it *Rockette*."

If Russell's story so far sounds more than vaguely familiar, you may have seen it all before: it is also Robin Turner's story, incident for incident in *Outrageous!* It is obviously more than coincidence. The film was adapted by writer-director Richard Benner from a story called "Making It"—by Margaret Gibson. Russell isn't exactly Robin, and Gibson is not really Liza, but the similarities far outweigh the variances.

In Benner's screenplay, Liza is a certified schizophrenic who escapes from an asylum and lands in her old friend Robin's apartment with a suitcase full of hallucinations and not enough Valium to last the night. Although they "sleep in separate worlds" (she picks up taxi drivers, he buys hustlers), they are in love on levels other than sexual preference. Certainly they support each other strongly: she encourages him to go out in drag, he helps her keep the monsters from her mind. Robin finally flees the provinces and makes it in an uptown nightclub in New York. Liza fights recurrent psychotic episodes, survives a pregnancy and gets shipped to New York. The stillbirth of her baby has con-

vinced her that she is "dead inside."

"You're not dead," Robin tells her, in the line that gets the movie's biggest laugh. "You're alive and sick and living in New York, like eight million other people."

In the movie's happy ending—as happy as a schizophrenic and a drag queen can be these days—Liza and Robin face the world together as crazies in a crazed land. In real life, the relationship ended abruptly when Gibson visited Buffalo for a weekend—and came back to Toronto with a husband. Then and there, she moved out of Russell's life, and he was

"You're not dead—you're alive and sick and living in New York like eight million other people"

left to sing the blues, in the manner of the ladies he plays.

"You can see the pain and the vulnerability through all of his impressions, which is why he is so appealing," says filmmaker Richard Benner. "He's making fun of our silly notions of these women and what those notions do to distort them, too. But he's also showing his own vulnerability; he hurts the same way they hurt."

Drag is a defense against the inner pain and the sidewalk taunts. It is a theater of existence, in which the roles affect the actors no less than the audience. Of course all performance springs from real aspects of a player's personality: Brando's inarticulate moodiness, Jane Fonda's steely tenseness, Richard Burton's rumpled passion are brought to all of their roles because such styles are second nature. But they are only styles, effects of mood that can influence a part but not complete it. Drag is more than that: it is first nature; it makes the part indivisible from the player. The deepest demons of the heart are given life on the stage.

"I can make any fantasy come true," Russell says. "I can be anything I want. I can change my age, I can change my looks—I can change my sex. I can become these women and speak from another planet. When I'm Peggy Lee I can speak from Venus. When I'm Carol Channing I can speak from"—he searches for the appropriate planet—"Detroit!"

And when he goes to Christopher Street—the main drag of the Greenwich Village gay ghetto—he can dress like a hooker. Male or female? "Whichever I feel like that night." Russell quick-steps around the crates in his apartment to demonstrate an androgynous hooker's walk to suit either incarnation. "It knocks 'em dead," he says. "They

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wouldn't *dare* insult me."

Russell's drag manages to keep the world at bay and draw it near, to repel and attract in equal measure. His show at Manhattan's Theater East—a tiny basement *boite* near the Queensboro Bridge—is as bitchy and dishy to "these women" as any street queen in a raunchy downtown bar could be; but Russell covers the crassness with a subtle respect that gives everything the stamp of class. He makes fun only of the actresses' pretentions; he chides them with pitiless parody for taking themselves seriously, but he is honest in his love for their strength.

"I'm in *awe* of them all," he says. "I love Barbra Streisand. I even told her so one day when I saw her shooting a movie on the street in New York. I said, 'I love you, Barbra.' She said, 'So do a million other people.' But it's true. I love the stars. You know, stars only come out at night; they don't go around doing the shopping, things like that. It's wonderful, it's the fantasy I grew up with."

His Peggy Lee is an overweight, wall-eyed android, mumbling incoherently and floundering mechanically while she tries to swallow the microphone: "cock-sucking put to music," Russell calls it. Midler is manic and mousey, Vaughan rapturous, Lucille Ball daffy and disastrously off-key. His Mae West is classically camp, Ethel Merman brassily banal. He knocks off Farrah Fawcett-Majors for her synthetic sexiness with a giddy flop of the wig, then puts it to Doris Day for her plastic puritanism: "When I was just a little girl, my mother said to me . . .eat a beaver and save a tree," he croons in the Day genre.

Russell's range is staggering: I counted 35 separate impersonations, from Sophie Tucker to Maria Ouspenskaya to Carole King—and I must have missed many that came and went in the bat of a false eyelash. In one tour de force, Russell sings both parts of a Louis Armstrong/Ella Fitzgerald duet, in full voice and perfect pitch. In another, he is Marlene Dietrich impersonating Madeline Kahn (in *Blazing Saddles*) impersonating Marlene Dietrich. His long first-act finale involves everyone who ever starred in *Hello, Dolly*, from Channing to Pearl Bailey. And at the end, he swings from a mischievous caricature of Anita Bryant masturbating with the Bible, to a poignant evocation of Garland falling to pieces when her rainbow was not enough.

Most New York critics who have reviewed Russell's movie or his show have felt obliged to disclaim any affection for drag shows ("I am not a fancier of nightclubs, female impersonators, or camp," said *Esquire*'s tough-to-please John Simon as he began his exultant notice of the live performance). But almost all—with the exception of the *New York Times*'s Richard Eder, who cannot bear even a hint of kink—seem drawn to Russell, as an exemplar of something distinctly new and still baffling, in one of the oldest theatrical professions. After all, there has been cross-sex impersonation in the theater at least since its appearance at the Odeon in ancient Greece, and today there are dozens of popular female impersonators doing their Garlands and Bette Davises in suburban dinner theaters or gay resorts from coast to coast.

But Russell transcends the form: not because of the perfection of his impersonations (Jim Bailey and Charles Pierce are both more exact in their replication

of the standard stars) but because he delivers an authentic piece of his own heart with every moment of mimicry. In a sense, he is the first "liberated" drag star, playing frankly with his sexuality in public, and thus drawing the audience into his secret self. "When people look at me," Russell says, "they're absorbed in my identity, my sexuality."

There was a time when impersonators denied their own sexual nature as well as the sexual content of their acts. Some even perpetuated the phony paradox that "most professional female impersonators are straight." Russell dispels all those myths by putting his fantasies on the line.

"I'm not always sure what I am; I have felt like a lesbian at times"

Russell's liberated, existential drag is so imaginative—and so funny—that it raises serious questions about sexual identity. His women, after all, are satires of himself—expressions of the bittersweet emotions at his androgynous core. Drag is a theatrically acceptable—and sometimes profitable—way to act out who he is.

His audiences in the big cities for both his cabaret show and *Outrageous!* are heavily, but not preponderantly, homosexual. Gays have more than a passing interest in the expression of sexual ambiguity—whether they adore or abhor the drag "scene." Russell does not neglect that audience. "I wanted to make Robin Turner the 'Gay Everyman,'" he once told me. "I'm not political in the ordinary sense, but in what I do. When I become the ladies, I'm not campaigning for gay rights, I'm not political—I'm *Bette*," he rasped, rolling his eyes and pursing his lips in a perfect flash of Margot Channing in *All About Eve*.

The gay audience can identify with Russell's performance because it springs from an authentic gay sensibility, not an imagery imposed by straight culture. But straights seem no less fascinated by the perplexing questions his various personas provoke: what really is male and female in us all, how do we know it, and what do we do to express it in the workaday world?

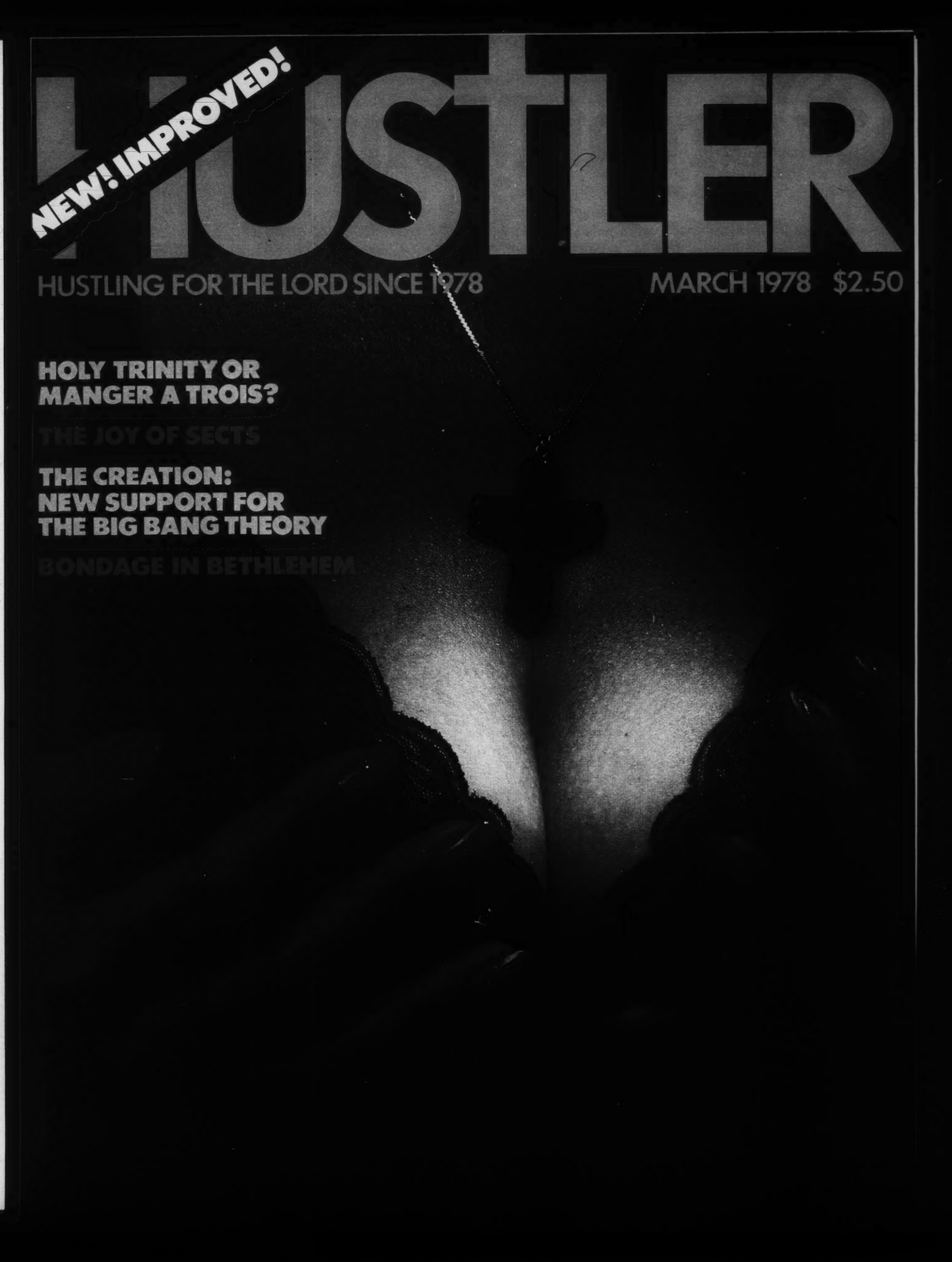
Like the best comedy of all ages, drag now seems to serve as an illustration—over*amp*lified as it is—of the serious concerns of its generation. Drag—in its broadest sense of impersonation and illusion—may turn out to be an essential comedic form of the seventies as vital to these years as black humor was for the decade gone by. Drag stretches to the limits the politics of personal liberation—the central concern of this "me decade"— just as black comedy dramatized the politics of social protest; sweet Craig Russell may prove our version of nasty Lenny Bruce.

Whatever drag's ultimate impact, it doesn't resolve the ambiguity that still festers in Russell's soul. Dressing up is an imperfect expression of his imagination, destined to cost him affection as a person at the same time that it earns him attention as a performer.

At least impersonation is reversible; he used to think about changing his sex by medical rather than theatrical means. "At the age of 14 I thought maybe I should be a girl," he says. "I studied transsexualism for three years. But when I found out what they did to you, I gave it up. One can assert the power of the female without suffering that pain. I can deal with myself as a man when I'm with a woman—with Margaret, for instance. But sometimes I'm not sure what I am. I have felt like a lesbian at times."

At the end of his show at the Theater East, Russell finally sheds all the wigs and costumes, the feather boas and the oversized bustles, and stands rumpled and a bit raw in a basic black body stocking. He is no longer one of his "ladies," but some wistful, wondering creature that seems close to his androgynous self. In a slight falsetto, somewhere between Peggy Lee and Judy Garland—his first and last impressions—he sings the sweet, sad song from *Outrageous!*:

"It ain't easy in this crazy world," it begins. "Sometimes all the magic slips away; I'm no good at bluffing. Who knows when they'll come and take us away? I hope not today." And then he smiles, shrugs, and waves his hand in farewell: "Feeling so gay."●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Great Moments in RELIGION

Future schlock:
porn publisher prepares for story conference
by praying for light, guidance
and grace

The Lord works in mysterious ways. Considering that the nation's soul has now slipped to its crotch, it should come as no surprise, then, that He has chosen to work through the wonderful world of pornography. To wit: if not enough people will come to church, the church will have to come to the people—even as they sit pawing through reams of pink pubescence.

We are talking, of course, about the recent conversion of Bad Boy Publisher Larry Flynt, through the services of Faith Healer Ruth Carter Stapleton, sister of the President of the United States. To fully appreciate this astounding bit of Americana, you should hear it from the principals themselves—just as 4 million *Today* viewers did a month ago. For those who missed it, or those who could not believe their ears, herewith a condensed transcript of that show, courtesy of NBC.

RUTH CARTER STAPLETON: The first time that we talked we met him at the airport, my husband and I. I was so nervous. I guess I thought a parade of nude women would just come off the plane. And Larry got in the car and we were just talking and chatting, and we went out to the country club for dinner. . . . We were sitting down at the bar drinking club soda, and I said, "Larry, in order to really understand you and for us to relate, my work is really going back and understanding your beginning," and said, "Would you tell me all about your life?" . . . And he started telling me about his childhood, which is, you know, my work. And he started crying, and I started crying. And we sat in the bar for maybe an hour. So that was the beginning, you see. So it put us both on the grounds of a real bond of honesty.

TOM BROKAW: You are the self-proclaimed king of American pornographers, and now something has happened to you.

LARRY FLYNT: Well, I am a completely new person, Tom. And it's something that I don't think anyone can really explain. I think if we could all explain it effectively, we wouldn't have all the problems and misguided people in the world today.

BROKAW: Well, can you describe yourself as a born-again Christian, which is a phrase and an experience that a lot of people are now familiar with, or were you ever born the first time, when it comes to Christianity?

FLYNT: I don't think I was ever born the first time. I—I know that I am born again now. How it all comes about is the part that you're just really not able to explain.

BROKAW: You're going to have a lot of criticism. There are going to be a lot of people, despite this interview, who are simply not going to believe any of this, that you're going to be thought of as someone who is just exploiting now the evangelical movement and the hold or the popularity of the Christian revival. How are you going to prove that this is not a stunt?

FLYNT: Oh, I'm not out to prove anything to anybody. But I think just the mere fact that I apologized to every woman in America and that I no longer intend to hang the woman up there as a piece of meat, as a symbol, that we condone her being exploited and being a sex symbol—I think the mere fact that I am going to make that change, and we're going to change Chester the Molester to Chester the Protector and have him protecting the little girl, rather than chasing after her. So, you see, even if I do get criticized, just those kind of changes that I'm making in the magazine, and where we're going to promote a healthy attitude towards sex, and we're going to deal with religion as well in a proper, educational manner, as we should, is going to do the country more good than I was doing it before. . . .

STAPLETON: . . . The one thing that seemed consistent in Larry always was his total honesty, which has sometimes been very shocking, you know; but he tells it like it is. . . . I really believe that he is going to change the magazine. I really believe it. . . .

FLYNT: And, you know, the people who say I'm doing this because of my conviction, or for this to be self-serving, I think it should be pointed out that a federal judge in Ohio has recently declared the law that I was convicted under unconstitutional. So, I mean, I am not trying to keep myself out of jail. . . . It's going to be a complete, new magazine. . . . Instead of hustling for sex, we'll be hustling for the Lord. That's all.

And, lest you think that this is some fly-by-night relationship, this union of healer and pornographer, consider the following:

On at least four recent occasions, Mrs. Stapleton used Flynt's lavish $3.4-million pink Israeli Jet Commander—sometimes for personal visits, sometimes for business trips to seminars at which she preached the healing potentials of a belief in God. In fact, Flynt's jet has made so many visits to Fayetteville, North Carolina, Mrs. Stapleton's home town, that baggage boys at Piedmont Airline's Fayetteville counter describe the aircraft nosing its way through the North Carolina fog as "a familiar sight."

On October 2, 1977, shortly after the two public figures met for the first time, Flynt sent his pink Commander to pick up Mrs. Stapleton and her husband in Fayetteville and brought them to spend a weekend at his home in Columbus, Ohio. On October 21, when her regularly scheduled flight on Piedmont Airlines was delayed by fog, Mrs. Stapleton was again invited by Flynt to use his aircraft—this time to attend a religious workshop in Flint, Michigan.

On November 21, Mrs. Stapleton flew with Flynt from Columbus to Texas, where her corporation, Behold Inc., recently purchased 30 acres of land to build a headquarters for its network of inner-healing centers.

Most recently, on November 28, Mrs. Stapleton flew with Flynt from Plains, Georgia, to Colorado, where he departed, and on to San Francisco.

Why so much traffic with the "prince of porn?" No doubt because Ruth Carter Stapleton remembers those inspirational words of her brother, memorialized in *Why Not The Best?*: "I have come to realize that in every person there is something fine and pure and noble, along with a desire for self-fulfillment. Political and religious leaders must attempt to provide a society within which these human attributes can be nurtured and enhanced." Amen•

PAGES 81 & 82: PHOTOGRAPHS BY LANE BERKWIT

Continued from Page 37

force that achieves power. They'd have to sell out to maintain their oligarchy."

"But one oligarchy can be better than another. Don't you think if the right leader emerged . . . "

"Forget it. You can't be Che Guevara in Hollywood," Bruce insisted, twisting that same crumpled straw around his index finger until it looked like a miniature barber pole. "In this town, there's only one thing to be. A hit."

Over dinner at a Chinese restaurant in Venice, California, that is distinguished only by its proximity to a candy store selling *Enema Punishment* magazine, I told Brandon what Bruce Vilanch had said about "comedy by computer."

"He's probably referring to the Preview House."

"What's that?"

"It's the place where 75 percent of all TV pilots are tested. Too bad you can't get in. You'd learn more about why we get the kind of television we do after five minutes in the Preview House than after talking to a dozen writers. But their security is very tight and they're *absolutely* closed to the press."

How, and on exactly what day, I happened to get into the Preview House must remain one of the least important bits of privileged information in First Amendment history. Suffice it to say that on a balmy winter evening, 349 randomly selected residents of the greater Los Angeles area and one ringer, who felt like he was back in high school buying a six-pack with a friend's ID, arrived at the Preview House bearing engraved invitations. They were sectioned off according to secret demographic patterns, then seated in a small theater. Some 200 found themselves facing pointers that rotated from "very good" to "very dull," and received instructions to indicate their relative interest in everything that came on the screen. In addition, 115 viewers were linked to galvanic skin sensors, more sophisticated lie detectors than the standard police polygraph.

First the audience was shown a Mr. Magoo cartoon, then a comedy pilot. Meanwhile, in a large glass booth at the back of the theater, technicians watched as every laugh, groan and murmur was transformed into a number on a dial or a blip on an oscilloscope. Behind the technicians, five executives in easy chairs scrutinized the program, the audience, the instrument panel.

Brandon later explained that they've been using that same Mr. Magoo cartoon since the Preview House opened in 1962 to test audiences for "normalcy." When an audience fails to react "normally" to the cartoon, the entire night's test results are discarded.

"Does that happen frequently?"

"Apparently it happens a lot during national disasters. Otherwise, not too often."

PHOTOGRAPH BY DOROTHY TANOUS

Bruce Vilanch: After Monty Hall, there's nowhere to go but up

Since there were no major assassinations, impeachments, oil embargoes or Beatle reunions in the days preceding my visit to the Preview House, it is reasonable to assume that my galvanic skin responses helped determine what 200 million Americans will watch on television this fall.

I tried to imagine what it would be like to get an idea for a show, develop the characters, write a pilot, raise production money, cast, shoot—go through all the changes necessary to put your vision of a TV comedy series on celluloid—then see that vision coldly matched against the heatprints from 115 randomly selected fingers with the inevitable result: the fruit of your creative labors altered by an unseen hand to produce a more perfect sweat pattern.

It seemed a grotesquely unfair system, yet all three young writers I'd met so far bent to it willingly. Stein and Illes were building a track record of trash with the hope that some day they might barter it for their freedom. Bruce Vilanch was soldiering after his fortune with a merry cynicism that separated him from every other ink-stained hack by the gossimer distinction of self-knowledge: I know what I am, therefore I am not.

After leaving the Preview House, I was more than ready to meet my first Hollywood drop-out.

Bob Hope has three full-time joke writers. Two have been with him for 30 years, the other is 30 years old.

I had a 12:30 appointment with Jeffrey Barron, but he called at 10 to postpone. "I'm sorry. I just spoke to Bob. He's playing Ft. Lauderdale tonight and needs seven Florida jokes by 4 p.m. Can we meet at 4:30?"

"Sure."

Jeffrey Barron wore gold-rim glasses, a droopy brown mustache and a full head of curly hair that was either not quite curly enough or had just wilted. His most unique physical attribute was the ability not to look pretentious smoking a pipe.

We met in the bar of my hotel and before letting him say anything, I told him what I already knew: that after six years as a TV comedy writer, he had risen to

the top of his profession, could pick his spots and name his price. Yet by last year, he was ready to quit the business. Then the Hope job came along, an opportunity to continue writing comedy without falling back into the regular network grind. To hear his friends tell it, the exclusive contract with Hope has made Jeffrey Barron a born again comedy writer. "Have I missed anything?"

"The basic outline is there, but I seem to remember it living a little better than it reads."

"Let's start at the end. Why were you thinking of dropping out?"

"Because writers are the lowest form of life in Hollywood. Perhaps you've heard that before?"

"It's been mentioned." The waitress arrived and I quickly ordered a beer, then watched Jeffrey for the first indication of how the interview would go; I'm often intimidated by afternoon shot guzzlers, while sippers of white wine tend to make me feel like my fly is open.

"I'll have a beer, too," he decided.

I immediately reread the description I'd just sketched in my notebook, crossed out the word "overweight." We were off to a good start.

"You've worked on comedy specials for everyone from Englebert Humperdinck to John Denver to Charo. What's the typical experience for a writer on a show like that?"

"Typical? OK, that's fair. I'll eliminate all the worst times and the few good ones . . . " Jeffrey thought for a moment, then smiled as the right "typical" experience came to mind. "On this particular show, we were two weeks away from our tape date with only 10 percent of the script written. The reason: No guests had been booked. The bookings were being handled by the star's manager, an inept, uncreative asshole with no feeling for comedy. Why, you ask, was he managing a top comedy star? Because the comic knew the asshole would protect his money.

"But the writers weren't too nervous because doing a skit is easy work. You can write a good one in a day, and we had 14 at that point. Then another day or two went by as the asshole tried to book people. Finally, he came running in and announced, 'We *might* have Olivia Newton-John.' The asshole was sweating and trembling. He thought he had pulled off a big one that would please his boss, the star. I said, 'When will you know for sure so we can start writing stuff for her?' And he looked at me with total disbelief, then said, 'If we get Olivia, who the hell cares *what* you write?'"

"Jesus. What a rotten thing to say."

"No, that's a *typical* thing to say. It is also typical for the producer to feel that the writer threatens his manhood. So the producers rewrite your stuff and keep you away from the star. On one show, I went up to the star during a taping and

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told him a joke I'd just thought of. The producer became hysterical. He said, 'Don't you *ever* talk to the star again.' Talking to the star isn't permitted because producers are afraid the stars will find out who's actually writing the scripts. Of course, not all producers are like that. Paul Keyes and Chris Beard are two I've worked for who've been creative and supportive. But you did ask for the typical experience."

"So far you've mentioned managers and producers. Do the stars—again, typically—also treat writers like 'the lowest form of life in Hollywood?' "

"Let me answer that with just one more 'typical' example." The beers arrived and Jeffrey poured his carefully, waited for the foam to subside, poured again. Clearly, he was buying time.

"What are you thinking about?"

"I was wondering whether or not to name names."

"Name them first. Then wonder."

" . . . When you're hired as a comedy writer for a big-budget, prime-time show, it's usually over at least a hundred people. There's a lot of prestige involved and a lot of money, so you're supposed to know something about comedy. Sandy Duncan was a guest star on a show I once did, and she knows *nothing* about comedy. Cute, yes. But not an expert on comedy.

"I wrote a sketch for her that I thought was very funny. The producer thought it was funny. The star thought it was funny. It *was* funny. But when Sandy read it, she began whining, just like this, 'I don't liiiike it. I don't liiiike it.' So the producer told me to write something else. I said, 'Fuck her. She's getting $10,000 for two days' work. Tell her to do the script or get off the show.' But of course the producer was appalled by such a revolutionary attitude. He said, 'We can't do that. That's Sandy Duncan. Write something new.' So in answer to your question, yes, stars also treat writers as the lowest form of life in Hollywood."

"But you find it easy to work for Bob Hope?"

"Easy, no. As you saw this morning, I'm on 24-hour call, like a comedy doctor. But he's fair. He never blames me when my jokes fail, and when a joke goes over well, he calls after the show to thank me for it. If Hope accepts a joke, he also accepts responsibility for getting the laugh. Unlike the host of a certain nightly talk show, who accepts jokes for his monologue if *he* thinks they're funny, then fires the writer if the joke fails."

"Being on 24-hour comedy call has probably done some weird things to your social life."

"Once I got a call in a restaurant. It was 8:05 and Hope was doing a benefit in Las Vegas at 8:30. He said, 'I just found out I'm being introduced by a Supreme Court judge. Can you do a couple of Supreme Court jokes? I'll call you back in fifteen minutes.' At 8:20, he called. I'd written two jokes in that time, and Bob had also written two, so we were in good shape. Then he said, 'Hmmm, maybe we can do a couple of lines on . . . ' I forget what; something topical. ' . . . I'll call you in six minutes.' At 8:26 he called, I gave him the jokes, he said, 'Yeah, yeah. That's good,' went on four minutes later and did the show. Now that's pressure. I'm in a phone booth in a restaurant scribbling jokes on a napkin because in six minutes Bob Hope is going to call me and I'm going to have to make him laugh."

"You're 30 years old. Presumably, you came out of the counterculture . . . "

"It would be more accurate to say I came *through* the counterculture. Although I did write a lot of anti-Johnson pieces and on several occasions marched to protest the war, I always left at 10 p.m. Ten was the extent of my commitment to the counterculture."

"But compared with Hope, that places you only slightly to the right of Mao Tse-tung. Isn't it difficult to work with one of America's foremost reactionaries?"

"Bob Hope and I certainly don't agree on everything. In fact, when we're not talking about comedy, we're often arguing about politics. But unlike most stars, you *can* argue with Bob Hope. Once he decides he likes you, a difference of opinion doesn't change the relationship."

"And your relationship with Hope has, essentially, changed your life."

"Definitely. It got the assholes off my back. The goal of most TV writers is to produce, direct, do films. Not me. My only goal is not to be hassled by assholes. Maybe that's because I still don't consider writing comedy a job. I've written jokes for fun since I was 15 years old and even if I had a *real* job, I'd still be writing jokes on the side. It's the most fun I have."

For Jeffrey Barron, track records are only one reason TV comedy never rises above lower-middle brow. Another is the lack of originality Barron claims has been designed into the broadcast industry. "The way the assholes have structured it, nothing new can ever be aired on television. Even if a show really *is* new, you have to be able to explain it in a way that makes it sound like a direct copy of something else. Otherwise the assholes start sweating and put away their checkbooks. You've got to say, 'Let's do a *TW3*,' or 'Let's do a *Laugh-In*, ' or 'Let's do a western *Waltons*.' Honestly, that's how TV people talk."

During the course of the afternoon, I became convinced that Jeffrey Barron comes about as close to living a perfectly existential life as one can in our society. He writes his jokes for the pure pleasure they give him at the *moment of crea-*

tion—the existential moment—not for the money or applause, two Philistine pleasures he was fully prepared to relinquish when the "assholes" were spoiling his fun.

I had to hand it to him. "After everything I've heard about people getting sucked into this business, it's impressive to meet a drop-out, someone who'd taken as much shit as he felt he could bear and was ready to walk because of it."

Jeffrey Barron wiped the last drops of beer from his mustache, pried the last shards of tobacco from his pipe, then looked up at me. "Are you kidding? I wouldn't have walked away from this kind of money. No way."

"Bob Hope called at 8:05 and said he needed four Supreme Court jokes by 8:30. I was in a restaurant. At 8:15 I'd written two. At 8:26 I gave him two more. He went on four minutes later and did them. Now that's pressure"

"But . . . "

"I know I told a lot of people I was leaving. And I *was* fed up. But I wasn't going anywhere. Hell, if I'd left Hollywood, I'd have had to get a *real* job."

It would be unfair to imply that every young writer in Hollywood is dissatisfied with the current state of TV comedy. It's just that those who expressed admiration for the medium proved lamentably inept spokesmen for their view.

Gail Parent and Kenny Solms are widely regarded as the intellectual heavyweight champions of TV comedy, although the more I learned about them, the more I wondered how they'd achieved such a menacing reputation on the basis of what appeared to be a rather pedestrian—if you will permit the expression—track record. Maybe it was their pre-Hollywood stint as a satirical night club act in Greenwich Village. Or maybe it was Gail Parent's authorship of *Sheila Levine Is Dead and Living in New York* and *David Meyer Is a Mother*, two works of severely limited imagination which, perhaps because of their proximity to hard covers, some readers have generously referred to as novels. But from what I've heard, the most likely explanation is that Parent and Solms have cultivated their public esteem through private intercourse, the way Dorothy Parker and H.L. Mencken built reputations among those who'd met them that far outstripped their published legacies.

So I found myself eagerly awaiting the lunch date we'd made almost a week in advance. Not only was I going to be enlightened and entertained by two of the wittiest conversationalists in Hollywood, I was also going to meet a couple of genuine, grade-A-large celebrities.

"Do you think TV comedy is better or worse today than it was in the 'Golden Age' of Sid Caesar, Sergeant Bilko and Lucille Ball?" I began.

Neither Gail Parent, who was simultaneously reading her menu and rifling through the contents of her purse, nor Kenny Solms, who seemed thoroughly absorbed with the business of staring out over the sea of talking and chewing faces that blanketed the outdoor garden of the Polo Lounge, responded to my question. In fact, after perfunctory handshakes in the lobby, neither Parent nor Solms had seriously responded to my existence.

"Oh, Gail, Gail," Kenny Solms exclaimed, nodding excitedly in the direction of a tall, balding man in a blue suit sitting at a palm-shaded corner table. "There's Neil Simon. Neil Simon is sitting right over there."

Gail Parent glanced up from her purse. "That's not Neil Simon."

"Yes, it is. It's Neil Simon. I swear to god."

"No, it isn't."

"Whenever I watch *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*," I told Gail, who co-created that show with Norman Lear and Ann Marcus, "I can never tell if it's supposed to be a parody of life, or a parody of other soap operas. Which did you intend?"

"We intended the show to be a parody," she replied, never for one instant taking her eyes off Kenny Solms. "But what kind of a parody is hard to say. You can't generalize."

Did I understand that? "Kenny," I tried. "When you and Gail were writing for Carol Burnett . . . " "Goldie!"

Kenny Solms leapt from his chair like a spring-loaded snake from a trick jar of peanut brittle. "Look who's here, Gail. It's Goldie."

Goldie Hawn, sporting a Ralph Lauren lumberjack blouse and a nose that could not appear in any family into which a Jew has married for at least three centuries, did not seem overjoyed by the public spectacle of Kenny Solms bear-hugging her on the crowded floor of the Polo Lounge. And she was even less enthusiastic when he followed her to her table for a 15-minute conversation.

That left Gail and me alone. I pressed on gamely. "Do you like TV comedy?"

She tried the menu again, then fingered, but did not open, the latch on her purse. Then a long, blank moment. Then . . . Bingo. Eye contact. I was in business. "I like TV comedy, but I don't let my children watch it."

"Why not?"

" . . . "

Gail Parent customarily treated herself to such leisurely pauses that I could never be certain whether her remarks were malicious obfuscations of the Ron Zeigler variety, or merely non sequiturs. But whatever the cause, interviewing her became a comical exercise in free association.

"You were saying that you don't let your children watch TV."

"People think TV writers have weak minds. That's a tremendous put-down. But if Kenny and I collected our best stuff, people would be shocked at how good it is."

"But if TV is so good, why don't you let your kids watch it?"

"I do. I just don't let them watch it during the week."

"What if something good is on?"

" . . . "

"You seem to be saying there's a lot of good stuff on television."

"I went to ten cities on a book tour for *David Meyer* and people only wanted to know about *Mary Hartman*."

"You've written both books and television. Do you think, in general, books are better than TV?"

"You can't generalize."

"Specifically, then, don't you agree that at least 100 American novelists are currently producing better work than anything on television?"

"Norman Lear is just like Thomas Hardy. We expect everybody to do everything different all the time—maybe. But there's no guilt in doing the same thing over and over again—well. Thomas Hardy was always on the heath. His characters were always the same. He told different stories well in the same general area."

"That was Goldie," Kenny Solms announced upon his long-awaited return to the table.

"Gail and I were comparing television and literature," I said.

"Speaking of literature, Gail. That *is* Neil Simon over there."

"No, it isn't."

"Do you think TV comedy might be improved if all the shows weren't locked into these 13- and 26-week schedules? If you had the freedom here that Marty Feldman, Monty Python and Peter Cook and Dudley Moore have in England?"

Kenny Solms agreed, but Gail Parent wasn't sure she understood the question. "What do you mean by freedom?"

Then Kenny Solms confided that he's never quite gotten comfortable with the term "TV writer." "I'm a frustrated screenwriter. I was thinking about that driving over here. But why should I have

to worry if Paddy Chayevsky is better than I am?"

"I'm an overachiever," Gail remarked to no discernable person or purpose.

"But remember," Kenny told her. "No matter how big you get, you'll never be as big as Streisand. Think about that until the day you die."

"Assuming you *did* have the freedom to break away from the conventions of American network comedy, what kind of show would you write?"

After a long silence, Kenny Solms shook his head, exhaled audibly, insisted, "It *is* Neil Simon. I'm telling you, Gail, that's him. I swear to god."

"No, it isn't."

Eugenie Ross-Leming makes conversational points with an intellectual intensity you can actually see. When she's serious, I mean *really* serious, she turns slightly sideways, cocks her head, bores into your eyes and arranges her elbows on the table in such a way that her front shoulder is slightly lower than her back; a posture not unlike the one Larry Csonka assumes when he wishes to make a serious point with a linebacker.

"I'm not a West Coast person. I don't like groovy, don't like laid back, don't like the beach. I hate the sun. I'm not into mellow. I never tell strangers to have a nice day. In fact, I'm hostile much of the time. I like fast service, hate cars, hate pink stucco and if I were fabulously wealthy I'd live anywhere in the world but here. When I first got out to L.A., I was just twitching with hostility, but then I figured, 'Why be an asshole? You're here to work, so go with it.' Now I don't badmouth L.A. to everyone I meet. Just to a select circle of friends."

Eugenie Ross-Leming, age 30, came to Hollywood after six years at Second City. She got work writing episodes within three weeks, and within a year Norman Lear had hired her as co-story editor of *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*. Next season, Eugenie will be head writer on a new syndicated show, also produced by Lear. "I was embraced so quickly by Norman because I was new and hadn't been beaten down yet. I was able to reject a hideous idea and be enthusiastic about a good one. The typical, beaten-down Hollywood hack will say, 'OK, I can have the dog go into the burning building and save the child. What else do you want?' Norman likes it when a writer argues with him and can make the point stick."

I pictured Eugenie leaning ferociously into an argument with the most successful comedy producer in TV history, then pictured Stein and Illes, track records in hand, twisting slowly, slowly in the wind. It wasn't difficult to understand why she had made it in the Lear organization and they had not.

We met for an eight o'clock dinner—at Eugenie's request—yet she arrived in the most authentic state of 5 p.m. frazzle I'd ever seen west of the Long Island Railroad waiting room. After delivering her "I'm not a West Coast person" overture, she squared up her shoulders, returned to the line of scrimmage, explained that it had been a particularly difficult day. "I just got out of a five-hour meeting with Norman. It was so weird. I was tired and didn't want to be there, but he *never* gets tired. He's probably radioactive. You end up saying to yourself, 'Shit, if he can do this, I can do it, too.'"

"I've heard mixed reviews from writers who've worked for Lear. Apparently you enjoy the experience. Why do you think many others don't?"

"Hacks don't like him because with Norman it's never a nine-to-five job. Also, he never tells you exactly what to do. There's some autonomy and no fascism."

"And most TV writers *like* fascism?"

"Sure. On a fascist show, everything's organized and you usually make it home for dinner."

"If tonight is any indication, you *rarely* make it home for dinner."

"When I first came to *Mary Hartman*, I looked at my office and saw not just a desk and chair, but a couch, a kitchen and a private bath. I thought, 'My, aren't they sweet. They want me to feel at home.' But later I found out that *was* my home. There's so much work to do, you can never leave. Listen, I'd rather be having a drink than this cup of coffee, but after I leave here tonight, I've got to go back and write six more scenes."

"Doing TV comedy in a soap opera format represents a legitimate innovation in the use of the medium. But is it an advance, the next evolutionary stage after the sit-com, or just a dead-end gimmick?"

"If you think of TV as a totally packaged and polished product, then serialized comedy *is* a gimmick because you're always going to have rough edges on a show like *Mary Hartman*. But you can have a lot of sloppiness and still be inspired. And completion doesn't necessarily imply perfection. Besides, people don't lead their lives episodically. I'll take rough edges over fascism anytime."

"In a way, it's easy for you to talk tough. You're working on a show you believe in for a man you respect. But what if you were out scratching for a buck like a lot of other young writers in this town? How low would you go?"

"Listen, honey, I've written for *Snip*, so what are you asking? But I was *really* paying dues then."

"The question is, how long would you have continued paying dues if nothing good came along? A very well-respected writer our age told me he'd do a lousy show if there wasn't a good one around because, with few exceptions, television is all one show. Do you believe that?"

"I believe it, but I'd never do a lousy show unless I was starving. I'm not a compulsive Hollywood writer. That kind of shit track record means nothing to me . . . Well, maybe it *is* easy for me to talk tough. Watch, next year I'll be writing *Love Boat 18* and *Son of Love Boat 22*."

After she'd gotten herself outside of a veal cutlet, the hardness fell away from Eugenie; a mixed blessing. We chatted easily about the TV comedy of the fifties, the television we were raised on.

"Then she says, 'How often would we have sex?' And he says, 'Infrequently.' So she says, 'Tell me, is that one word or two?'" "That's funny"

"Neil Simon, Mel Brooks and Sid Caesar didn't know what the rules were. No rules, no hacks. That's the kind of TV Norman is trying to create now."

"And everything else is shit?"

"I'm not one of those people who go around saying television is shit. A lot of it *is* shit, I just don't go around saying so. Many of Norman's shows are real good. Alan Alda is real good. The rest . . . Well, I enjoy television, even the shit."

"But you didn't enjoy working on *Snip*, the ill-fated *Shampoo* rip-off."

"That was a weird experience, but probably a lot more typical of what TV writing is like than *Mary Hartman*. David Brenner played a Beverly Hills hairdresser and the girl who played the manicurist simply couldn't act. And when I say couldn't act, I'm not talking Lady Macbeth. Listen to this: The producer once told me a scene I'd written for her was too long. I said, 'You mean it needs tightening?' And he said, 'No, she just can't say that many words in a row.' Also, they wouldn't let me use long words."

"Like more than four syllables?"

"No, like they kept changing 'terrible' to 'bad.'"

"You must have had some fairly surrealistic conversations with the producer."

"Actually, not. The only thing he'd ever tell me was, 'I want it to sparkle.' I'd say, 'Do you think this line goes better here or there?' And he'd say, 'I don't know. Just make it sparkle.'"

It is difficult to disbelieve Eugenie Ross-Leming. Unfortunately, I arrived back at my hotel by eleven, watched

Mary Hartman, and was confronted with the awful truth: After an adventurous, imaginative and frequently hilarious first few months, *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* had become, despite Eugenie's best efforts and arguments, a drab and thoroughly enervated exercise. By the time Johnny's monologue came on ("What's in the news today? Oh yes, psychologists at Stanford University have identified a new phobia—Akronphobia—the fear of waking up in the middle of the night and finding yourself in bed with a snow tire"), I was deeply mired in a treacherous funk that I estimated to be at most only 50 percent Coors induced. I called Brandon. He answered on the eighth ring, panting heavily.

"I guess you were taking out the garbage."

"Yeah, right. It's a two-pail night. What's happening?"

"We've got to have breakfast tomorrow. It's an emergency."

"I'll meet you in Nate n' Al's at 7:30."

"Can you make it 7:00?"

"No."

There's a sameness to Nate n' Al's that can be either frightening or reassuring, depending upon your mood. That morning, the unbroken landscape of white patent loafers, plaid pants and sunburned wrinkles beneath full heads of silver hair seemed as foreboding as the theme song and deep-space visuals that used to open *The Twilight Zone*. Bagel in hand—I was not totally without solace—I unburdened my soul to a friend. "It's been over a week. I've hung out with eight successful young comedy writers, most of them bright and apparently talented, yet none have been able to do anything with this medium. How can that be?"

"I don't know. In fact, I don't even know what the hell you're looking for."

"We were raised by television. You and I and every writer I've met. That makes us special. But nobody's putting any of that special consciousness back into TV. You watch a show written by somebody who used to think Ward Cleaver was his stepfather and it sounds exactly like everything else the Preview House computer spits out. Is that all there is to this town?"

"Have you spoken to TVTV?"

"But they don't do comedy. And they're not network."

"Then why did NBC just hire them to write and produce a comedy pilot?"

" . . . " (I sounded like Gail Parent.)

"You ought to check them out."

"I guess so."

TVTV is the real thing.

In the late sixties, TVTV, then called Top Value Television, was a loose confederation of revolutionary videotape and graphic arts communes. The group took its first small step out of the underground by covering the 1972 political conventions on cable for Sterling Manhattan. John O'Connor in the *New York Times* described the TVTV coverage as "better than all three networks put together, and for less than their coffee budget: $30,000." That led to a Public Broadcasting contract for five hours of documentary programming, for which the group won the Columbia U. DuPont Award for excellence in electronic journalism.

Michael Shamberg, who, along with Meggan Williams, Hudson Marquez and Allen Rucker, was a founding member of TVTV, is also the author of *Guerrilla Television*, a book that has become the central document of the videotape revolution.

Before visiting TVTV, I screened many of their nonfiction pieces and was stunned, first by the most satisfying blend of wit and objectivity to be found anywhere in the electronic media, and second by the unique textures and points of view the videotape camera can bring to a subject. The difference between videotape and film is like the difference between a Jill Friedman 35mm snapshot and a Matthew Brady box-camera-and-tripod formal portrait.

It was not difficult to understand their desire to make the jump from documentary to comedy. In the later nonfiction pieces, their sense of irony frequently lost its lightness, appeared to be chafing against the rougher edges of the still-real world. Clearly, they were ready for an unreal world, and they could not have selected a less real one than the world of network TV.

Lily Tomlin spotted them first. She and partner Jane Wagner showed some TVTV tapes to Dick Ebersole, the unusually far-sighted NBC executive who, while head of late-night programming in New York, helped put together the show that eventually became *Saturday Night Live*. "Their documentary stuff knocked me out," Ebersole told me. "So I began encouraging them to get into comedy and we made the deal for the pilot they're shooting now. If that works out, we'll do it weekly as a summer replacement series."

"Do you think you can handle them in a network situation? I mean, from what I've been told, these people haven't heard of the 'mellow seventies.' And politically, they're still getting their heads busted at the Democratic Convention of 1968."

"If you mean, are we making them sell out, the answer is no. We're going to give them their best shot, let them do everything their own way, and see what happens. It's an experiment. Maybe we'll get something brilliant, maybe we'll get nothing at all. But one thing's for certain: We *won't* get *Mary Tyler Moore*."

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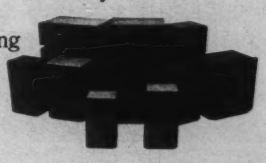

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Hudson Marquez sprawled out in the trailer between takes. He wore a red star on his jean shirt, one gold earring and a raggedy beard the color of dried apricots, had a barrel chest, fine, small features and a network of facial capillaries that appeared only hours away from rupture. If Sir John Falstaff had joined Dr. Spock's army instead of Prince Hal's, he'd have looked exactly like Hudson Marquez.

"A lot of the young writers doing TV comedy now are real talented," Marquez began, between sips of cold coffee from a dangerously sagging Styrofoam cup. "But the head writers and producers haven't changed, so no matter who's doing the scripts, they all go through that same Hollywood synthesizer and come out as either Bob Hope one-liners or Tony Orlando and Dawn making toilet jokes. That's why our show is going to be so different. We're writing *and* producing it, and NBC is letting us do anything we want."

"So I've heard. But what exactly *do* you want?"

"Our show is about TV. It has various sets of characters who make TV and watch TV. Think about that. How many times have you seen TV characters watching TV?"

"Archie Bunker watches a ballgame once in a while, but I guess that's about it."

"That *is* it. Rhoda and Joe, Bob Newhart and Emily, Mary Richards—none of them watch TV, talk about TV; they don't even have a television in the house. And on *Family*, which is supposed to be a super-realistic portrayal of upper-middle-class American life, when the teenage daughter goes up to her room she has no television and a $99 GE stereo with about six records. There is simply no recognition of the role the electronic media play in this country. And that's an outrage."

"Any other innovations?"

"Yeah. Getting back to those good young comedy writers I mentioned before, one of the reasons their stuff never gets on the air is that the producers keep telling them, 'People won't understand that.' The general public doesn't know shit.' Well, we don't think that's true, so we're having our TV-watching family talk back to their set and have the normal types of conversations about television that intelligent people have."

When shooting resumed, Marquez excused himself, began picking his way along the cluttered aisle of the trailer toward the exit. I called after him. "Your ideology makes sense, but it hasn't made me laugh."

He tossed me a copy of the shooting script. "Here. Laugh your ass off."

I did.

The TVTV Show warbled crazily among three levels of electronic consciousness—a commercial within a newscast within a comedy. Parts of it were profoundly funny. Other parts made sense, not dogma. And at no time did I feel the familiar flush of embarrassment that frequently comes with watching a program condescendingly aimed at a general public the producer feels "doesn't know shit." Even before I'd finished reading the script, I knew I'd found what I was looking for. TVTV was a group of people my own age who had come through the very special experiences of my generation—including the experience of being raised by television—and were now putting that set of experiences on the air.

Bruce Vilanch despises television, and feels no obligation to justify either himself or the medium: "You can't be Che Guevara in this town. You've got to be a hit"

I was suddenly overcome by an odd sense of closure. That morning, I had no idea how much longer I was going to stay in southern California. But as I walked out of the trailer, blinked up into the low January sun, began stumbling around looking for someone to return the script to, I knew my Hollywood pilgrimage was over.

On April 30, 1977, *The TVTV Show* was aired by NBC in *Saturday Night*'s 11:30 time slot. It was even better than I'd remembered, and the next morning a close friend, who is satisfied with virtually nothing in life, called to tell me exactly what TVTV's PR flack had said the day I'd screened their documentaries: "This group is going to permanently alter the medium."

I placed an excited call to Dick Ebersole. "You must be feeling pretty good today."

"Not bad. Why?"

"*The TVTV Show*. I'll bet the numbers were fantastic. When does their summer series go into production?"

"Haven't you heard?"

"No. What?"

"They broke up."

"Come on. How could they break up?"

"I don't know. They broke up."

"But that's crazy. I mean, they started out as a commune. They lived together, did everything together."

"Not everything. They'd never done network TV."●

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Movies/by Richard Corliss

Sit-com: The Joke's on You

Talk to anyone, from a Hollywood mogul to your neighborhood stock broker, and you'll hear that people go to the movies to see what they can't get on television: stars (*A Star is Born*), spectacle (*Star Wars*), sex (*Looking for Mr. Goodbar*). So what are the two sleeper hits of 1977? One is *Smokey and the Bandit*, a CB-jeebies jape starring Burt Reynolds and directed by the only auteur ever to have had a Gabriel toy made in his image (the Hal Needham Stuntman Kit). The other is **Oh, God!** with John Denver and George Burns. Both movies have the ragged, relaxed look of TV pilots. And both could be shown this minute, with no loss of effect, on the small screen. *Smokey* might need some of its saltier language excised; but the dialogue in *Oh, God!* is already so low-sodium (its strongest obscenity is "crap") that it's just about the only current non-Disney film that could be shown, as is, on TV. Today's question: Why is it heading toward a $30-million domestic gross? Possible answer: Because, in some cases at least, people go to the movies to see exactly what they *can* get on TV—only more so.

John Denver looks like a clone of all the New Christy Minstrels, and made his name by pasteurizing the concerns of the ecology generation into pap rock—Songs to Eat Grape Nuts By. Denver the movie actor strikes about as many moods as Denver the composer strikes chords—four: ordinary goodness, hootenanny enthusiasm, righteous indignation, beatific understanding—all in an upbeat tempo and a major key. Together they play a melody of country-boy optimism that manages to stumble backward into wisdom, and suggest nothing so much as the common-man hero of such Frank Capra social comedies as *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* and *It's a Wonderful Life*. In fact, Denver was signed a few years ago to star in an updated musical version of Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*: the property was eventually remade by another wild-eyed optimist, Tom (Billy Jack) Laughlin. But *Oh, God!* is the very model of some modern minor Capracorn: from the seemingly random selection by fate (or, here, God) of an average Joe (here Jerry), to the hero's growing anger at his fellow Americans' apathy, to the ultimate, uplifting conversion of the infidels and the recognition that in each of us, no matter how laid-back or played-out, there is a capacity for Good.

Just describing this, I feel the way Dorothy Parker did about Shirley Temple: "She makes me want to fwow up." And it depresses me to think that *Oh, God!* is the work of men who were responsible for two of the funniest, and most influential, TV sit-coms: director Carl Reiner (*The Dick Van Dyke Show*) and screenwriter Larry Gelbart (*MASH*). But Reiner has been moving away from the bubbly sophistication of the *Van Dyke* show—and 180 degrees from the slapstick misanthropy of his films *The Comic* and *Where's Poppa?*—toward born-again fantasy; in his last TV series, the short-lived *Good Heavens*, Reiner played an angel in a white sports suit. The problem with an inspirational comedy like *Oh, God!* is one inherent in any forthrightly ideological narrative: for the sake of making points, the story scores points off one-dimensional knaves and fools, instead of creating a comedy world like the Van Dyke household or the *MASH* army base in which (in Jean Renoir's famous phrase) everyone has his reasons. Granted, the ideological approach can work if the comedy is infused with the livid tinge of satire, in which case the villains often are more memorable than the passive, put-upon hero. But Reiner's and Gelbart's strength is the strength of the best liberal sit-coms: to describe, in comic terms, the passing triumphs and trials of your everyday, middle-class mensch.

Movie audiences don't seem to mind that *Oh, God!* doesn't adhere to the classical unities. Outside New York City (in other words, in America), they're flocking to see it. It's tempting to see in this a yearning for happy endings, for escape into an era of good vibes. It would explain the startling successes of *Rocky* and *Star Wars*, and the first rapturous response you can feel and hear in theaters showing *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (whose plot is a virtual tintype of the *Oh, God!* story—with a divine spaceman substituted for George Burns, and with Terri Garr again playing the hero's skeptical wife). It would not, however, account for the season's other major hit, *Mr. Goodbar*, or for the flops registered by the deeply felt family drama *Islands in the Stream* and the optimistic comedy *Handle With Care*. Maybe it's

Oh God!: A Rocky Mountain mutant

Susan Dey: The Katt's pajamas

just that, despite the derision of the hip, John Denver is a box-office draw—though I can't help thinking he won't be a major star until my mother can distinguish him from Paul Williams and Arte Johnson. Here's a suggestion for the Disney Studios, to attract all those TV addicts back to the theaters: cast Denver, Williams and Johnson in a remake of *The Three Mouseketeers*.

While reading Sam Merrill's devastating indictment of hack sit-com writers (page 26 of this issue), I kept wishing that he had broken bagels with a few of the really accomplished writer-producers of TV comedy—people like James Brooks and Allen Burns (creators of *Mary Tyler Moore*), Alan Alda and Gene Reynolds (*MASH*), Charlotte Brown (*Rhoda*), Danny Arnold (*Barney Miller*), Ed. Weinberger and Stan Daniels (*The Bob Newhart Show*), even Nick Abdo (of my favorite secret sinful pleasure, *Laverne and Shirley*)—people with the power to shape the shows seen by 50 million people a week, and with the talent to be satisfied with what they've done. I made the same wish—it grew into a litany—while watching **First Love**, a bittersweet romance told in sit-com style. Here was a movie that promised to treat, in full frontal fashion, the rituals of courtship and bedroom etiquette that the timidity of TV censors kept Mary Richards, let alone Betty Anderson, from ever confronting. But when William Katt and Susan Dey, the film's young lovers, do get into bed and start chatting blithely about orgasms and body odors, the frankness seems forced, the dialogue too cute, the feelings unearned, the atmosphere that of a college singles bar instead of a warm bed holding a couple of kids who've fallen in love and, for just a moment, think of themselves as the only two people in the Garden of Eden.

The scene, the whole movie, could have worked—and how lovely if it had!—if writers Jane Stanton Hitchcock and David Freeman had keyed their dialogue to a smile instead of a smirk, and if director Joan Darling had contented herself with evoking from the audience exactly that smile instead of laugh-track cackles. But I may be demanding too much from another good-natured, well-intentioned movie; or maybe I'm demanding too much from the *First Love* audience, conditioned as it is (as we all are) by the discretions and anal aggressions of those sit-com characters we live with once a week. Maybe we don't even want to think that Mary Richards *has* orgasms, let alone talks about them. (Now Rhoda. . . .)

Sit-com formats, like Hollywood movies in general, fall into two categories: romantic (men and women) and platonic (men in groups). Occasionally the two forms have been successfully yoked—notably in Mary Richards' WJM newsroom, with its "family" of journalists who were closer than most siblings. (Journalists are like that.) But it's *MASH* and *Barney Miller* that managed to elevate the adolescent machismo of American adventure comedy to a kind of TV art—domesticating it, liberalizing and liberating it—by allowing a little low-key humanity to show through the cynical, wise-cracking armature.

Denver the movie actor strikes about as many moods as Denver the composer strikes chords—four; ordinary goodness, hootenanny enthusiasm, righteous indignation, beatific understanding

Semi-Tough might seem to be the movies' latest attempt to solder the eternal triangle (Burt Reynolds and Kris Kristofferson as two guys in love with the same ditsy girl, played by Jill Clayburgh) to the great American rectangle (the football field). After all, the film is based on Dan Jenkins' raucous novel about unsportsmanlike conduct among the members of a pro football team; and the director is Michael Ritchie, most of whose films are comic examinations of our national will to win (an Olympic gold medal in *Downhill Racer*, a Senate election in *The Candidate*, a beauty contest in *Smile*, a baseball championship in *The Bad News Bears*). But Walter Bernstein's script puts its emphasis on the zigzag design for living of Burt and Kris and their live-in good buddy Jill; and how each man in his turn realizes that he loves Jill; and how one of them gets Jill to the altar when . . . well, you know the story: *The Philadelphia Story*.

Semi-Tough has a lot of bathroom laughs for those of us who think a joke doesn't have to be funny as long as it's dirty. And Burt Reynolds proves here that he's the seventies' sexiest farceur—a *Cosmo* Cary Grant. But the movie's muscle-bound physical comedy gradually loses its way, gets out of control, like a Joe Namath pass in the high winds of Shea Stadium. By the end of the movie, all that vulgarity has lost its vitality through numbing repetition; and the romance forfeits our interest, centered as it is on one of those madcap heiresses who can't get her head together because there's nothing inside. There's something to be said for the restrictions of TV comedy: it demands that you come up with a bit of business less obvious than a pratfall, a punch line more elegant than "Bullshit!"

For the first twenty minutes of **The Goodbye Girl**, you may squirm in dreadful anticipation: an entire movie of smart-ass cute talk between a kvetchy New York loser and her 10-year-old daughter! Aaaargh! Of all the sit-com conventions, the adorable, all-knowing brat is the most loathsome; and at first *The Goodbye Girl* looks to be Neil Simon's gargoyle valentine to *The Brady Bunch*. Well, I advise you to grit your teeth, or take a nap, or go out for popcorn, because, honestly, the movie does get better. Part of it has to do with the sudden appearance of Richard Dreyfuss, as an intense young actor, in our heroine's apartment; she is furious, we're relieved. Dreyfuss, a day-old matzoh ball of neurotic energy, has never been so engaging; though he comes on at first like a Duddy Kravitz who's been through est, he succeeds in making us enjoy—and then *like*—his truculent intensity, primarily because here he's playing an actor in thrall to his craft, an artistic egotist. And as the charmingly predictable plot unfolds (Dancer Meets Actor, Dancer Hates Actor, Dancer Loves Actor), Marsha Mason is able to bring some sense and sympathy to her role. The mood of this old-fashioned love story is so pervasive, even the child (Quinn Cummings) becomes likable. Who says Hollywood miracles died with Cecil B. DeMille?

It's been said before that Neil Simon writes best about what he knows best: the poker-playing pals of *The Odd Couple*, the bickering vaudevillians in *The Sunshine Boys*—and here, every performer who's ever tried to make the big time on gruel and grits. I propose a Second Law of Simonizing: his movie scripts are funnier, tighter, and a lot less smug than his plays. *Murder By Death* was an almost perfect parody (with, granted, its own self-destruct mechanism when the plot had nowhere to go but into a spiral of complications and multiple identities). *The Goodbye Girl* is nearly as inventive in the form of a traditional domestic three-act comedy; and the gags almost always seem to emerge from the characters, who just happen to be very amusing people, rather than from the Simon joke file. Herbert Ross, who also directed *The Turning Point*, knows what to do with actors and characters: if we get to like them, we'll laugh with them. You'll enjoy laughing along with *The Goodbye Girl*—it's almost as much fun as *Laverne and Shirley*. ●

Books/ by Geoffrey Wolff

Vaillant Effort Falls Short

Adaptation to Life
by George E. Vaillant.
Little, Brown (396 pp., $9.95).

George Vaillant (pronounced like the adjective for *valor*) is a psychiatrist in his mid-40s who teaches at Harvard Medical School. He has also for ten years been the director of the Grant Study, a long-term investigation of the lives of promising graduates of an esteemed and unidentified university (Harvard) in the classes of 1939-44. The study, endowed by William T. Grant, a philanthropist, was undertaken with a view to the systematic analysis of its subjects' mental health, happiness and social and financial success.

Two hundred and sixty-eight undergraduates were originally chosen on the basis of their good physical and mental health, and the leg up they were already imagined to enjoy above their college fellows. The criteria for selection were, as Vaillant allows, "Victorian." Rebels were excluded, and the deans and health officers responsible for decisions favored boys "able to paddle their own canoe" or "boys that we were glad we had admitted to college." Ambition was a further criterion: the easy-going were as underrepresented as oldest children were overrepresented.

Much was hoped for from the Grant Study, and much has been delivered. What was anticipated to be of instructional value has been, even when the results have not been as expected: "A major purpose of the men who founded the Grant Study had been to determine college predictors of future mental health." No such utilitarian end has been realized, because of the far more interesting discovery that what the study's judges are pleased to think of as mental health is in fact evolutionary, that men (at least until they are 30, and probably beyond) change their characters.

As undergraduates the subjects were questioned for twenty hours about their childhoods and aspirations and sexual hopes and habits. Their parents were interviewed. Their bodies were measured, as well as their IQs and their imaginations. They were assigned all kinds of values, from the bogus (we now know) classification of types according to endo- and ecto-morphism to such schoolmasterish judgments as might label this one a charming boy and that one a pain in the ass. Then they were sent annual questionnaires for ten years, and personally interviewed during the years 1950-52. Their spiritual temperatures were monitored—How's the job coming? Do you love your wife? Does she love you back?—and their children were classified according to *their* successful adjustments to the exigencies of life. And finally, for the purposes of this book (the study is ongoing), Vaillant selected at random 95 men to interview during the years 1967-69.

He and his fellows have concluded that the 95 have turned out better than the generality of their classmates, and very very much better than the commonality of their American contemporaries. They are healthier, wealthier and wiser. The company presidents among them have fun as well as money, and unhappy subjects don't take vacations or enjoy good health and wages. Unhappy childhoods have enduring consequences, and it matters to have friends and to enjoy games.

It is important to say that any of the summaries I offer here will do injustice to the estimable precision, humility and labor that Vaillant's conclusions display. Unlike a book review, his elaboration of the material in his trust is anything but reductive, and so I propose with more than the usual insistence the *caveat*: check me against the book.

If you do you will find that social class at the time of the study's inception is now without bearing on the fortunes of the subjects. The average income ten years ago of those finally selected for intense study was $30,000 and among the classmates of Norman Mailer, Benjamin Bradlee and John F. Kennedy are poets, novelists, professors, many lawyers and doctors, notables of every kind, a few down-at-heelers and alcoholics. There are more liberals than conservatives among the subjects interviewed, and 80 percent are Protestants and 10 percent each Jews and Roman Catholics.

The statistics are secondary in interest to the conclusions to be taken from them, and these will be controversial. From the beginning of the Grant Study, its purpose has been to assign some measure to happiness, and so it has: those perceived as being on the top of their lives are called Best Outcomes, and those on the bottom are called Worst Outcomes. A complex of standards is used to arrive at these judgments: whether a subject earns more at age 45 than his father earned, whether he is married, or divorced, or included in the pages of *Who's Who in America*, or in good health, or free of psychiatric complaints, or successful at his chosen profession.

Many of the conclusions seem at first look to be excessively tautological, as though the study had concluded that happy men are . . . well . . . *happier* than sad men. Nonetheless, a

ILLUSTRATION BY JIM HARTER

healthy humility characterizes this book; it is of a humane kind that leads Vaillant to remark, without regret for the cliché, "it takes all kinds of people to make up a world."

These many kinds are classified principally according to their defenses. It was decided at the outset to focus on men with a head start as they dealt with hardships and reversals, as they "alter themselves and the world around them in order to adapt to life." Vaillant is lucid and jargon-free, but he apologetically makes use of certain specialized locutions—projection, repression, aggression, displacement, dissociation and the like—taken from classical psychiatry's lexicon of defense mechanisms. Vaillant, an explicit admirer of Erik Erikson ("the man who invented himself") and of Anna Freud and her father, assigns values to these defenses along a line that progresses from such "mature" mechanisms as humor to psychotic manifestations, but the fundament of these values is practical rather than moral: "Altruism is better than projection not because it is more moral, but because it is more effective." Thus Vaillant muses that during his own maturation he has come to reverse his adolescent judgment about the characters of Stanley Kowalski and Blanche DuBois in *Streetcar Named Desire*, and now finds the former more "healthy" than the lattter. People "alter themselves and the world around them in order to adapt to life." One or the other must give, and in Vaillant's putatively neutral morality it doesn't much matter which.

Vaillant's early admiration of Erik Erikson seems born out by the findings of the study: people pass through stages; they change; they mature. But the registration of these changes is subtle, and subject to the fallibility of the judge as well as the witness: "As with adolescent turmoil, midlife crises are much rarer in *community* samples than in *clinical* samples. The high drama in Gail Sheehy's bestselling *Passages* was rarely observed in the lives of the Grant Study men."

In part this may be due to the unwillingness of subjects born when these were, and products of a place like Harvard, to complain, or to dramatize themselves.

But of course they are players in the drama of the study itself, and cannot have been unmindful of this. When they failed to respond to their questionnaires they were reminded forcefully of their parts in a scheme. I wish Vaillant had taken more explicit cognizance of their self-awareness, of the Uncertainty Principle as it bears upon the effect of the measurer on the measured.

Not that Vaillant disregards in any way his own biases; he is scrupulous in his anticipation of inexactitude. He identifies himself as privileged, privately schooled, a father, a Harvard man and a Protestant. This history has effects: Vaillant respects candor and unhysterical friendliness and unpushy hospitality. He prizes what is called "manliness," firm handshakes and unhesitating eye contact. When he came to the study he read the various files, and then took charge of them: "If I watched the men grow from eighteen to forty-five in a few hours of record review, I have watched them grow from forty-five to fifty-five over the span of a decade. I, too, have altered." He is nothing if not responsible: "For two months, while I wrote their histories, I was continually confronted by a mirror that reflected my own jarring behaviors. Since confrontation is the only way to breach the immature defenses, pots call kettles black at the risk of noticing their own soot."

Many of Vaillant's conclusions seem tautological, as though the study concluded that happy men are... well... happier than sad men

Vaillant wants so badly to be fair that he damages his case with occasional contradictions, or perhaps uncertainties. He writes that "there was no one in the Study that I did not end up liking" and "there was no man in the Study whom I did not respect." But the subject to whom Vaillant assigns the name Oliver Kane made him "furious" and talking to Dr. Tarrytown was "like talking to a callow adolescent." On the other hand, reviewing his treatment of Tarrytown and, I suspect, others he could not bring himself to like, Vaillant writes that "I merely betray the limitations of my heart, and of my craft."

While nothing in this study of adaptation should cause the slightest apprehension regarding the capaciousness of its author's heart, there are aspects of his craft that distress me. He anticipates the charge that his subjects were selected from a remarkably narrow band, from "a small, perhaps unfamiliar tribe." No women, all college graduates, white, preselected for their conformity to a perception of the normal and the admirable. In his defense, or in defense of the conclusions and general principles he wishes to draw from his study, Vaillant quite sensibly remarks that he has studied the health of organisms as a botanist might, under conditions as nearly as possible approximating their ideal environment.

Fine. I am far more troubled by the fruits of his discretion. Vaillant is proud of the masks he has imposed upon his subjects to shield them from public recognition. I would bet my hat that I recognize three of them, but Vaillant would deny this: "If the clinical detail fits anyone of the reader's acquaintance too closely . . . it will almost certainly turn out that he has identified the wrong man." So that there is a subject named Kowalski who turns out to be a Jew. God knows what besides names Vaillant has altered. Is it possible that a man given a war medal by him was in fact a C.O.? Or vice versa?

This kind of tampering throws suspicion on everything. In one of the most illuminating episodes of Philip Roth's novel *My Life as a Man*, the Jewish novelist Peter Tarnopol falls out with Dr. Spielvogel, his analyst (and in a previous fiction, Alexander Portnoy's). Spielvogel's offense is not uncommon among those who would extrapolate from particular narratives general truths. For the needs of a symposium titled "The Riddle of Creativity," Spielvogel has disguised Tarnopol as an Italian-American poet fifteen years older than he in fact is. Tarnopol remarks that the disguise only reveals Spielvogel, whom he has trusted to distinguish between shades of narrative grey, as "somewhat dimwitted about matters of social and cultural background that might well impinge upon a person's psychology and values. And while we're at it, Dr. Spielvogel, a poet and a novelist have about as much in common as a jockey and a diesel driver."

For all Vaillant's scruples and good will, his humility and eagerness to protect his subjects, I cannot accept as true his conclusions. They are statistically accurate, of course. And they may be a good deal more than that. But the cases themselves are suspect: too pat and smooth, crossing lines too easily between cause and outcome. There isn't enough to them, finally. Not enough that doesn't fit. Not enough that's beyond rational comprehension, save in the case of a homosexual poet.

This man wrote Vaillant a letter challenging the Grant Study's entire spectrum of values, and the letter "dumbfounded" Vaillant. The letter, whose truths Vaillant tentatively embraces, says in effect that for some people—homosexual poets, let's say—generalizations about best and worst outcomes don't apply. Vaillant agrees with Freud that before the "problem of creativity" analysis must lay down its arms. For the reason that society rewards its artists, and makes them happy, often on account of their aberrations, artists are a special class. My question is fundamental: who is not a member of a special class? ●

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The Train Doesn't Stop at (CHOKE!) Dogpatch Anymore/by Mark Goodman

Final Tribute

AH TOLE YO' NOT TO DISTURB MISTAH CAPP'TY HE GOT WORLD AFFAIRS ON HIS MIND?-
THAR'S ONE THING YO' HAINT GONNA FOBIT—
SADIE HAWKINS DAY !!!
WILL NOVEMBER 26th BE OKAY?
HAT- ANY DAY IS OKAY WHEN AN -UGH!- DOGPATCH MAIDEN KIN KETCH -SOB!- A DOGPATCH BACHELOR !!-
Al Capp '75

In 1934 a young, wild-looking, one-legged cartoonist's assistant began making the rounds of the feature syndicates in New York with a portfolio of curious sketches. They were, if they could be characterized at all, profoundly unromantic projections of life as the New Englander had once viewed it in the Cumberland Mountains. He found a receptive editor who advised, "Just a few changes. Nobody's interested in hillbillies—better have this family living in Jersey or someplace near New York. Then, you might make the mother sweet instead of comic, and for God's sake, take that pipe away from her. The girl's fine, except for one thing—she hasn't got a job. Maybe she goes to work in an office in New York, and this Abner, he's in another office . . . ."

Al Capp was having (SNORT!) none of it. Instead he sold his gallimaufry of mountain grotesques as they wuz to United Features, and on Aug. 13, 1934, *Li'l Abner* opened in eight newspapers. By the end of World War II, 900 newspapers brought the hideously complicated lives of Dogpatch's supposedly uncomplicated folk to 38 million readers. Capp was compared to Twain, Dickens, Carroll and Voltaire. That sort of (BRACK!) inverted intellectualizing was as fashionable and as foolish in post-war America as it is today. Still, Capp was certainly son and heir to the swift, satiric strokes of (CHORTLE!) Daumier and Goldberg.

Abner differed from its contemporaries—*Little Orphan Annie*, *Blondie*, *Dick Tracy* and *Joe Palooka*—in that it was genuinely *comic*. Yet in the end, how can you compare Dogpatch—or its (PTUI!) polar analogue, Lower Slobbovia—with any other place on earth forsaken by God and (UGH!!) civilized man. Ah, Dogpatch, mad, moveable feast of po'k chops and turnips and Kickapoo Joy Juice, which rendered even Hairless Joe stiff as a frozen union suit on an Ozark clothesline. And I mean "moveable" literally, since Dogpatch was variously situated, deep in a valley, in a desert hard by Onnecessary Mountain, on a jagged crag of that very mountain. The only visible means of access to this septic fairyland was the West Po'k-chop Railroad. The train, which ran weekly up Onnecessary's northern face, rarely got to run down its southern face. Invariably it toppled backwards and killed all its passengers.

If anyone dared read into this clockwork carnage a comment on the depradations of rampant capitalism, so gold-darg be it. For Capp was something of a cartoon monster himself, a bellowing egomaniac with more opinions than a porkypine got quills. Fashioning the chicken-scratchin', pig-rootin', houndog-yowlin' hillside of Dogpatch into a primitive proscenium, and brandishing his pen like an ox-goad, Capp exuberantly paraded the (SOB!) foibles and follies of modern industrial man before the hamlet's innocent, if casually depraved, citizenry: Mammy squinting over her corncob pipe at all the consarned, newfangled notions that threatened her hillbilly heaven; bumbling, ineffectual Pappy, reborn a sucker every minute; and, of course, the mountain man-child, Abner Yokum.

Never was lad's soul so bright an escutcheon; how could it be otherwise, since Abner's inspiration was young Henry Fonda? His purity alone was usually enough to ward off the (GASP!) skullduggery of the scruffy frock-coated legions of con men, shills, shylocks, faith healers, crooked contracters, grifting guvimint men, bleak-spirited bankers and bunko artists that infested Dogpatch like chiggers up a pair of Oshkosh coveralls. Wasn't much he could do about the (GOOD LORD!) natural disasters that perennially imperiled his community: the black cloud that followed Joe Btfsplk everywhere, the evil eye of Evil Eye Fleegle, the shivering shadow of Teetering Rock. But there was one force of nature Abner could surmount, and that was the force that drew him and Daisy Mae Scragg together like a pair of (HAW! HAW!) hot wart hogs.

That's right, children, those lovable schmoos and kigmes were merely backwater red herrings; the Dogpatch Capp loved was downright double-dog *dirty*. Daisy Mae, tremulous, sweet-petaled flower amidst a briarpatch of hated Scraggs, was (SIGH!) the virgin voluptuary incarnate. The rest of the sultry gals who switched their tails around (GULP!) Li'l Abner were, to be plain, ravening sluts: Wolf Gal, known carnivore; Appassionata Von Climax, whose name pretty much spelled it out, even for the *naif* Abner; and Moonbeam McSwine, just *itchin'* for it.

It was their cormorant appetites that spawned Sadie Hawkins Day. So merry was the chase that coeds across the land adopted the event, and soon it became a national holiday. Some took it quite seriously; in West Virginia, when a chuckling captive refused to marry his captor, her brother promptly shot him.

Capp reveled in outrage like *hammus Alabamus* in slops. He invited his readers to draw Lena the Hyena, the Slobbovian swiddie pie so (YEECHH!!) ugly he "had to censor her" in his strip; a half million entries poured in. He lampooned one of his own kind, Chester Gould, with a savage parody of Dick Tracy named Fearless Fosdick who, ventilated by bullet holes the size of mortar rounds, would announce to his superior, "Merely superficial wounds, sir. I shall report for duty in the morning."

In 1950 the marriage of Daisy Mae and Li'l Abner (Marryin' Sam's $1.35 wedding, in which he leaps off the mountainside with a Roman candle in each ear whistlin' *The Burning of Rome*) made the cover of *Life*. But Capp's popularity plummeted in the sixties. The sharpshooting New Dealer had become a grapeshot right-winger, and as we learned from Agnew and Hope, Establishment invective just isn't funny. *Abner* was replaced by *Doonesbury* and *Wizard of Id* as the arbiter-clown of modern manners, and Capp finally decided to board up Dogpatch for good. But before he abandoned his malodorous yokels, Capp the uncured ham had to step into his final strip and plant one last SMACK! on the luscious, luscious lips of Daisy Mae Scragg. ●

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